

HOW TO DIE

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HOW TO DIE

An Ancient Guide to the End of Life



Fig. 1. The author
preparing to die

Seneca

Edited, translated, and introduced by James S. Romm

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He lives badly who does not know how to die well.

(*ON SERENITY OF MIND* 11.4)

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INTRODUCTION

Recent experiments have shown that psilocybin, a compound found in hallucinogenic mushrooms, can greatly reduce the fear of death in terminal cancer patients. The drug imparts “an understanding that in the largest frame, everything is fine,” said pharmacologist Richard Griffiths in a 2016 interview.¹ Test subjects reported a sense of “the interconnectedness of all people and things, the awareness that we are all in this together.” Some claimed to have undergone a mock death during their psychedelic experience, to have “stared directly at death ... in a kind of dress rehearsal,” as Michael Pollan wrote in a *New Yorker* account of these experiments.² The encounter was felt to be not morbid or terrifying, but liberating and affirmative.

“In the largest frame, everything is fine.” That sounds very much like the message Lucius Annaeus Seneca preached to Roman readers of the mid-first century AD, relying on Stoic philosophy, rather than an organic hallucinogen, as a way to glimpse that truth. “The interconnectedness of all things” was also one of his principal themes, as was the idea that one must rehearse for death throughout one’s life—for life, properly understood, is really only a journey toward death; we are dying every day, from the day we are born. In the passages collected here, excerpted from eight different works of ethical thought, Seneca spoke to his addressees, and through them to humankind generally, about the need to accept death, even to the point of ending one’s own life, with a candor nearly unparalleled in his time or ours.

“Study death always,” Seneca counseled his friend Lucilius, and he took his own advice. From what is likely his earliest work, the *Consolation to Marcia* (written around AD 40), to the magnum opus of his last years (63–65), the *Moral Epistles*, Seneca returned again and again to this theme. It crops up in the midst of unrelated discussions, as though never far from his mind; a ringing endorsement of rational suicide, for example, intrudes without warning into advice about keeping one’s temper, in *On Anger*. Examined together, as they are in this volume, Seneca’s thoughts organize themselves around a few key themes: the universality of death; its importance as life’s final and most defining rite of passage; its part in purely natural cycles and processes; and its ability to liberate us, by freeing souls from bodies or, in the case of suicide, to give us an escape from pain, from the degradation of enslavement, or from cruel kings and tyrants who might otherwise destroy our moral integrity.

This last point had particular resonance for Seneca and his original readers, who had often seen death or degradation arrive at an emperor's behest. A politician as well as a philosopher, Seneca had been a young senator in the late 30s AD, when Caligula went mad and began brutalizing those he mistrusted; in the 40s, under Claudius, Seneca was himself sentenced to death in a political show trial, but the sentence was commuted to exile on the island of Corsica. Recalled to Rome and appointed tutor to young Nero, Seneca spent the 50s and early 60s inside the imperial household, watching as Nero became more deranged and, toward family members whom he perceived as threats, murderous. Finally, suspected (probably wrongly) of collusion in a failed assassination plot, Seneca too incurred Nero's wrath and was forced to commit suicide himself, in his sixties, in AD 65.

Rome's century-old form of government, in which a *princeps* or "first man" held unofficial but near-absolute power, had, in the reign of Caligula especially, revealed itself as an autocracy. As chief adviser to Nero for more than a decade, Seneca dutifully served the system's needs, and got rich by doing so, points held against him by his contemporaries (and by modern readers as well). But philosophy offered an antidote to the toxic atmosphere of the imperial palace. Seneca continued to publish treatises throughout his fifteen years at Nero's side, giving friends and fellow senators a larger moral framework for dealing with troubled times. (He wrote verse tragedies as well, of which many survive today, though these works, vastly different in tone from his prose writings, are not included in this volume.)

Seneca, like many leading Romans of his day, found that larger moral framework in Stoicism, a Greek school of thought that had been imported to Rome in the preceding century and had begun to flourish there. The Stoics taught their followers to seek an inner kingdom, the kingdom of the mind, where adherence to virtue and contemplation of nature could bring happiness even to an abused slave, an impoverished exile, or a prisoner on the rack. Wealth and position were regarded by the Stoics as *adiaphora*, "indifferents," conducing neither to happiness nor to its opposite. Freedom and health were desirable only in that they allowed one to keep one's thoughts and ethical choices in harmony with *Logos*, the divine Reason that, in the Stoic view, ruled the cosmos and gave rise to all true happiness. If freedom were destroyed by a tyrant or health were forever compromised, such that the promptings of Reason could no longer be obeyed, then death might be preferable to life, and suicide, or self-euthanasia, might be justified.

Seneca inherited this Stoic system from his Greek predecessors and his Roman teachers, but gave new prominence to its doctrines

concerning modes of death and, in particular, suicide. Indeed this last topic receives an emphasis in his writings that far exceeds what is found in other surviving Stoic treatises, such as the *Discourses* of Epictetus or the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. We modern readers must bear in mind that, as a political insider under two of Rome's most depraved rulers, Seneca often witnessed suicides of the kind he describes in his essays. Caligula and Nero, and indeed all the Julio-Claudian emperors, regularly required their political enemies to take their own lives, threatening to both execute them and seize their estates, if they did not do so. Seneca was a witness to many such forced suicides, and so he revisits the theme of whether and when to make an exit from pain, or from political oppression, with a frequency and intensity that go far beyond his fellow Stoics.

In other ways too, Seneca was more than a pure or doctrinaire follower of the Stoic path. At times he borrows from the Epicureans, a rival school, the idea that death is merely a dissolution into constituent elements that will have a new "life" as parts of other substances. Occasionally he sounds the Platonic theme of the immortality and infinite reincarnations of the human soul. He had no fixed ideas about the afterlife, except for his certainty that it held nothing fearful, and that the visions of monsters and torments in Hades promulgated by the poets were only empty fictions. He wavered too in his assessments of self-euthanasia: at times he praises those who forestalled a painful death, or an execution, by ending their own lives, but at others he admires the fortitude of those who declined to do this. Even in the case of suicide, which he generally defends as preferable to a morally debased life, Seneca reveals one hesitation: when family and friends depend on you, he admits in one passage of his *Epistles*, you may have to pull your departing life back from the brink. (He himself, as a young man plagued by suffocating respiratory illness, had rejected suicide for the sake of his elderly father, or so he tells us in *Epistle* 78.1, a passage not included in this volume.)

The "right to die," even in cases of painful terminal illness, has proven a contentious idea for modern societies. Physician-assisted suicide or voluntary euthanasia has been legalized, at the time of this writing, by only a handful of countries and by four out of fifty US states; in nearly all cases, the laws permitting these measures have been passed only within the last two decades. Debate over these legal measures has usually been intense, with opponents often basing their arguments on notions of the sanctity of human life. But Seneca's writings remind us that there is also such a thing as a sanctity of death. To "die well" was immensely important to Seneca, whether that meant accepting one's death with equanimity, choosing the time or

method of one's exit, or, as he often illustrates with vivid examples, enduring with courage the violence done to one's body, either by one's own hand or by that of an implacable enemy.

Because these examples are so frequent and so grim, modern readers have sometimes found Seneca's writings to be macabre or death obsessed. But Seneca might reply that such readers are *life* obsessed, deluding themselves with a denial of the importance of death. Dying, for him, was one of the essential functions of living, and the only one that could not be learned or refined through repetition. Because we will die only once, and quite possibly without advance warning, it's essential that we prepare ourselves ahead of time and be ready at all moments.

"Study death," "rehearse for death," "practice death"—this constant refrain in his writings did not, in Seneca's eyes, spring from a morbid fixation but rather from a recognition of how much was at stake in navigating this essential, and final, rite of passage. "A whole lifetime is needed to learn how to live, and—perhaps you'll find this more surprising—a whole lifetime is needed to learn how to die," he wrote in *On the Shortness of Life* (7.3). The passages collected in this volume—chosen from the eight prose treatises in which death looms largest, spanning about a quarter century of Seneca's life—are his attempts to accelerate that lesson.

HOW TO DIE

I. PREPARE YOURSELF

Seneca's greatest prose work, the Moral Epistles, is a collection of letters addressed to a close friend, Lucilius, who like Seneca was in his 60s at the time the Epistles were composed (AD 63–65). Death and dying are a prominent theme in these letters and several deal almost entirely with that theme, including letters 30, 70, 77, 93, and 101, all represented in this volume either in whole (as signaled by the inclusion of their salutations and sign-offs) or in large part.

The letters usually take as their point of departure an event in Seneca's daily life, such as a visit to an ill friend, or (as in the case of the excerpt below) an idea Seneca had encountered in his reading. Though they take the form of an intimate correspondence, the Epistles were primarily written for publication, and the "you" addressed in them is sometimes Lucilius but at other times the Roman public, or even humanity generally.

Epicurus says, "Rehearse for death,"¹ or, if this conveys the meaning better to us, "it's a great thing to learn how to die." Perhaps you think it useless to learn something that must only be used once; but this is the very reason why we ought to rehearse. We must study always the thing we cannot tell from experience whether we know. "Rehearse for death"; the man who tells us this bids us rehearse for freedom. Those who have learned how to die have unlearned how to be slaves. It is a power above, and beyond, all other powers. What matter to them the prison-house, the guards, the locks? They have a doorway of freedom. There's only one chain that holds us in bondage, the love of life. If it can't be cast off, let it be thus diminished that, if at some point circumstance demands it, nothing will stop or deter us from making ourselves ready to do at once what needs to be done. (*Epistle 26.8–10*)

In the letter excerpted below, Seneca coaches Lucilius as to how he should advise an unnamed friend who has withdrawn from public life into quieter pursuits.

If [your friend] had been born in Parthia, he would be holding a bow in his hands right from infancy; if in Germany, he would brandish a spear as soon as he reached boyhood; if he had lived in the time of our ancestors, he would have learned to ride in the cavalry and to strike down his foe in hand-to-hand combat. Each nation has its own training to coax and command its members. Which one, then, must your friend practice? The one that has good effect against all weapons and against every kind of enemy: contempt of death.

No one doubts that death has something terrible about it, such that our minds, which Nature endowed with a love of itself, are disturbed by it. Otherwise there would be no need to make ourselves ready and hone ourselves for that which we might enter by a certain voluntary impulse, just as we all are motivated by self-preservation. No one *learns* to lie down contentedly in a bed of roses, if the need arises, but rather we steel ourselves for this: to not betray a confidence under torture, or to stand on guard, though wounded, through the night, if the need arises, without even leaning on an upright spear, since sleep has a way of sneaking up on those who lean against some support....

But what if a great yearning for longer life holds you in its grip? You must believe that none of the things that depart from your sight, and that are subsumed into the universe from which they sprang (and will soon spring again), is used up; these things pause, but do not die, just as death, which we fear and shun, interrupts but does not strip away our life. The day will come again which will return us into the light.² Many would reject that day, were it not that it returns us without our memories.

But I will instruct you carefully in the way that all things that seem to die are in fact only transformed; thus the one who will return to the world should leave it with equanimity. Just look at how the circuit of the universe returns upon itself. You will see that nothing in this cosmos is extinguished, but everything falls and rises by turns. The summer departs, but the year will bring another; winter falls away, but its own months will restore it. Night blocks the sun, but in an instant daylight will drive that night away. Whatever movement of the constellations has passed, repeats; one part of the sky is always rising, another part sinking below the horizon.

Let me at last come to an end, but I will add this one thought: neither infants, nor children, nor those whose minds are afflicted, are afraid of death; it would be repellent, if our reason did not offer us the same contentment to which they are led by their folly. Farewell. (*Epistle* 36.7–12)

Seneca suffered his whole life from respiratory illness, probably including tuberculosis, and from asthma. His discomfort was such that, in young adulthood, he contemplated suicide, according to his own report. He must have experienced attacks like the one described below throughout his life, but they took on added significance as he grew older, especially given that the name doctors gave to them (according to Seneca) was meditatio mortis, “rehearsal for death.”

Dear Lucilius,

Ill health had granted me a long reprieve; then it came on me suddenly. “What sort of illness?” you ask. It’s an apt question, since

there's none that I haven't experienced. But one alone is, you might say, my allotment. I don't know what its Greek name is, but it could be fittingly called *suspirium*.³ It comes on with sudden and brief force, like a tornado; it's nearly over within an hour (for who could die for a long time?). Every physical discomfort and danger passes through me; there's nothing I find more aggravating. And how could I not? This is not illness—that's something else entirely—but loss of life and soul. Therefore the doctors call it "rehearsal for death," and sometimes the spirit accomplishes what it often has attempted.

Do you suppose I'm cheerful as I write these things, because I've escaped? I think it would be ridiculous to delight in this outcome as though it were a form of good health—just as ridiculous as to proclaim victory when one's court case has been postponed. Yet, even in the midst of suffocation, I did not cease taking comfort from brave and happy thoughts. "What's this?" I say to myself. "Does death make trial of me so frequently? Let it: I've done likewise to death, for a long time." When was that, you ask? Before I was born: for death is nonexistence. I know what that's like. It will be the same after me as it was before me. If death holds any torment, then that torment must also have existed before we came forth into the light, but, back then, we felt nothing troubling. I ask you, wouldn't you call it a very foolish thing if someone judges that a lamp is worse off after it's snuffed out than before it has been lighted? We too are snuffed out and lighted. In the time in between, we have sense and experience; before and after is true peace. We go wrong in this, Lucilius, if I'm not mistaken: we think that death comes after, whereas in fact it comes both before and after. Whatever existed before us was death. What does it matter whether you cease to be, or never begin? The outcome of either is just this, that you don't exist.

I kept telling myself these encouragements, and others of the same kind—silently, for there wasn't space for words. Then little by little the *suspirium*, which had already turned into a kind of panting, gave me longer respites and slowed down. But it hung on, and even though it has ceased, I do not yet have natural, easy breathing; I feel a certain break in its rhythm, a delay between breaths....

Take this on faith from me: I won't tremble, at the last moments; I'm prepared. I don't think at all about the entire day ahead.⁴ Praise and emulate that man who does not disdain to die, though it's pleasant to live; what virtue is there in leaving by being thrown out? Yet here too is a virtue: I'm being thrown out, but let me take my leave nonetheless. The wise man is never thrown out, for to be thrown out is to be expelled from a place that you leave unwillingly; the wise man does nothing unwillingly; he flees from necessity, since he desires that which it will force upon him. Farewell. (*Epistle 54*)

Nothing can be of such great benefit to you, in your quest for moderation in all things, than to frequently contemplate the brevity of one's life span, and its uncertainty. Whatever you undertake, cast your eyes on death. (*Epistle* 114.27)

II. HAVE NO FEAR

By the time Seneca began his magnum opus, the Moral Epistles, in AD 63, he had been writing ethical treatises for more than a quarter of a century. His earliest surviving works, from the early 40s AD, are consolations, designed to offer comfort to friends or relations (including his own mother) who were mourning the death or absence of a loved one. In the Consolation to Marcia from which the passage below and several others in this volume are taken, Seneca addresses a mother grieving for the loss of a teenaged son.

Consider that the dead are afflicted by no ills, and that those things that render the underworld a source of terror are mere fables. No shadows loom over the dead, nor prisons, nor rivers blazing with fire, nor the waters of oblivion; there are no trials, no defendants, no tyrants reigning a second time in that place of unchained freedom. The poets have devised these things for sport, and have troubled our minds with empty terrors. Death is the undoing of all our sorrows, an end beyond which our ills cannot go; it returns us to that peace in which we reposed before we were born. If someone pities the dead, let him also pity those not yet born. (*To Marcia* 19.4)

In his essay On Serenity of Mind, Seneca makes the case that fear of death not only makes dying more difficult but diminishes the nobility and moral integrity of all of life. In the second passage below he uses Julius Canus, a man otherwise barely known to us, to illustrate the “greatness of mind” found in those unafraid of death.

What’s to be feared in returning to where you came from? He lives badly who does not know how to die well. Thus we must, first and foremost, reduce the price we set on life, and count our breath among the things we think cheap. As Cicero says, gladiators who seek by every means to preserve their life, we detest, but we favor those who wear their disregard of it like a badge. Know that the same outcome awaits us all, but dying fearfully, often, is itself a cause of death. Dame Fortune, who makes us her sport, says: “Why should I keep you alive, you lowly, cowering creature? You’ll be more wounded and slashed if you don’t learn how to offer your throat willingly. But you’ll live longer, and die more easily, if you accept the sword-stroke bravely, without pulling back your neck or holding up your hands.” He who fears death will never do anything to help the living. But he who knows that this was decreed the moment he was conceived will

live by principle and at the same time will ensure, using the same power of mind, that nothing of what happens to him comes as a surprise. (*On Serenity of Mind* 11.4)

Julius Canus,¹ an exceptionally great man ... got into a long dispute with Caligula. As he was leaving the room, Caligula, that second Phalaris,² said: “Just so you don’t take comfort from an absurd hope, I’ve ordered you to be led away for execution.” “Thank you, best of rulers,” Canus replied. I’m not sure what he was feeling; I can imagine several possibilities. Did he want to give insult by showing how great was the emperor’s cruelty, that it made death seem a boon? Or was he reproaching the man’s habitual insanity (for those whose children had been executed, or whose property had been taken away, used to give thanks in this way)? Or was he embracing the sentence joyfully, like a grant of freedom? Whatever the reason, his reply showed a greatness of mind.... He was playing a board game when the centurion in charge of leading off the throngs of the condemned told him it was time to move. Hearing the call, Canus counted up the pieces and said to his partner: “See that you don’t cheat and say you won, after my death.” Then he turned to the centurion and said, “You’re my witness; I was ahead by one.” (*On Serenity of Mind* 14.4)

In later life, to judge by the Moral Epistles, Seneca witnessed the illnesses and deaths of many close contemporaries, and made careful note of how each man faced his final challenge. He then held up these exemplars for the edification of his friend Lucilius and, through the publication of the Letters, the entire Roman world.

Dear Lucilius,

I went to see Aufidius Bassus, a very noble fellow, stricken and struggling with his advancing years. But already there is more to weigh him down than lift him up, for old age is leaning upon him with its huge weight, everywhere. The man’s body, as you know, was ever weak and dessicated; he held or even patched it together (as I might more accurately say) for a long time, but suddenly it gave out. Just as, when a ship has got water in the hold, one crack or another can be stopped up, but once it has begun to come apart in many spots and to go under, there’s no more help for the splitting vessel—just so, in an old man’s body, weakness can be supported and propped up for a time. But when, just as in a rotting house, every join is coming apart, and a new crack opens up while you’re patching the old, then it’s time to look around for a way to leave.

But our friend Bassus stays sharp minded. Philosophy furnishes him with this: to be cheerful when death comes in view, to stay strong and happy no matter what one’s bodily condition, and not to let go

even when one is let go of. A great ship's captain continues the voyage even with a torn sail, and if he has to jettison cargo, he still keeps the remainder of the ship on course. This is what our friend Bassus does. He looks on his own end with the kind of attitude and expression that would seem too detached even if he were looking on someone else's. It's a great thing, Lucilius, and always to be studied: when that inescapable hour arrives, go out with a calm mind.

Other kinds of death are intermingled with hope. Illness lets up, fires are put out, ruin bypasses those whom it seemed about to sink; the sea spits out, safe and well, those whom it had just as violently swallowed down; the soldier retracts his sword from the very neck of the doomed man. But he whom old age leads toward death has nothing to hope for; for him alone, no reprieve is possible. No other way of dying is so gradual and so long lasting.

Our Bassus seemed to me to be laying out his own body for burial, and accompanying it to the grave; he lives like one surviving himself, and bears the grief over himself as a wise man should. For he talks freely about death and bears it so calmly that we are led to think that, if there's anything troubling or fearsome in this business, it's the fault of the dying man, not of death. There's nothing more worrisome in the act of dying than there is after death; it's just as insane to fear what you're not going to feel as to fear what you're not even going to experience. Or could anyone think that it *will* be felt—the very thing that will cause nothing at all to be felt?

"Therefore," Bassus declares, "death is as far beyond all other evils as it is beyond the fear of evils." I know such things are often said and often must be said, but they have never done me so much good, either when reading them or hearing people say that we must not fear things that don't hold any terrors. It's the man who speaks from death's own neighborhood that has the most authority in my eyes. I'll say plainly what I believe: I think that the man in the midst of death is braver than the one who skirts its edges. The approach of death lends even to the ignorant the resolve to face inevitabilities, like a gladiator who, though very skittish throughout his combat, offers his neck to his enemy and guides the sword toward himself if it strays off-target. But the death that is only nearby (though sure to arrive) does not grant that steady firmness of resolve, a rarer thing that can only be exhibited by a sage. I would gladly listen therefore to one who can, as it were, report on death, giving his opinion about it and showing what it's like as though having seen it close up. You would, I suppose, put more trust and give more weight to someone who had come back to life and told you, based on experience, that death holds no evils; but those who have stood in front of death, who have seen it coming and embraced it, can best tell you what sort of upset its approach brings

with it.

You can count Bassus among these—a man who doesn't want us to be deceived. Bassus says that it's as silly to fear death as to fear old age, for just as age follows youth, so death follows age. Whoever doesn't want to die, doesn't want to live. Life is granted with death as its limitation; it's the universal endpoint. To fear it is madness, since fear is for things we're unsure of; certainties are merely awaited. Death's compulsion is both fair and unopposed, and who can complain of sharing a condition that no one does not share? The first step toward fairness is evenhandedness. But there's no need now to plead the case of Nature; she wants our law to be the same as hers. Whatever Nature puts together, she undoes, and what she undoes, she puts together again. Truly, if it happens that old age dispatches someone gently, not suddenly tearing him away from life but little by little releasing him, that person ought to thank the gods for bringing him, after he's had his fill of life, to a rest that is needed by all and welcomed by the weary.

You see people who long for death, more so indeed than life is usually sought. I don't know which imparts to us a greater resolve: those who beg for death or those who await it calmly and cheerfully. The former happens occasionally, owing to madness or some sudden outrage, while the latter is a kind of serenity born of steady judgment. Some arrive at death in a rage, but no one greets death's arrival cheerfully except those who have long prepared themselves for it.

I confess that I had gone to see Bassus, a dear friend, rather often, for multiple reasons; in part, to learn whether I would find him the same on every occasion, or wouldn't the power of his will diminish along with the strength of his body? In fact it only increased in him, just as the joy of chariot drivers is often seen more clearly as they approach the seventh and last lap of victory. He would say, in accord with the teachings of Epicurus, that he hoped, first of all, there would be no pain in his final breath; but if there was, he had a certain comfort in its very brevity, for no pain is long lasting if it is great. Moreover there would be relief for him in this thought, even if his soul was torturously torn from his body: that after this pain, he could no longer feel pain. But he had no doubt that his elderly soul was already on the edge of his lips, and no great force would be needed to pull it away. A fire that has gotten control of ready tinder must be put out with water, or sometimes by tearing down buildings, he said; but the fire that lacks fuel dies down by itself. I listen to these words gladly, Lucilius, not because I'm hearing something new, but because I'm being drawn toward what is, as it were, right before my eyes.

What then? Have I not seen many others cutting their lives short? Indeed I have, but those who come to death with no hatred of life,

who receive death rather than drawing it toward them, make a deeper impression on me. Bassus used to say that the torment we feel is of our own making; we tremble when we believe death is near. But whom is it *not* near, when it's ready and waiting at every moment, in every place? "Let's consider," he says, "at the point when something seems to draw near that might cause our death, how many other causes there are, even close at hand, which we don't fear." An enemy threatens someone with death, but an upset stomach beats him to it. If we want to separate into categories the reasons for our fear, we will find some that exist, others that merely seem to. We don't fear death but the contemplation of death. Death itself is always the same distance away; if it is to be feared, then it should be feared always. What time is there that's exempt from death?

But I ought to be afraid that you'll hate this lengthy letter even more than death! So I'll come to an end. As for you: study death always, so that you'll fear it never. Farewell. (*Epistle* 30)

It's not death that's glorious, but dying courageously.... No one praises death; rather, we praise the person whose soul death stripped away before causing it any turmoil.... The death that was glorious in Cato's case was base and worthy of shame in Decimus's.³ This is Decimus: the man who, while seeking postponements of death, though destined to die, drew apart in order to empty his bowels, and, when summoned to his death and ordered to bare his neck, said "I'll bare it if I can live." What madness, to take flight when there's no going backward! "I'll bare it if I can live." He almost added "... even under Antony." That's a man worthy to be allowed to live, alright!

But, as I was discussing earlier, you see that death, in itself, is neither good nor bad; Cato made the most honorable use of it, Decimus the most shameful. Anything that has no glory of its own takes on glory when virtue is added to it.... Metal is neither cold nor hot in itself; it grows hot when stuck in a furnace, and cools off again when plunged into water. Death is honorable by way of what's honorable, namely virtue and a mind that disdains outward appearances.

But, Lucilius, even among the things we call "intermediate" between good and bad, there are distinctions to be made. Death is not "indifferent"⁴ in the same way as whether you have an odd or even number of hairs on your head. Death is among those things that are not bad but, nevertheless, have an outward appearance of badness. For the love of one's own self, and the desire to maintain and preserve oneself, are deeply rooted, along with an aversion to annihilation, which seems to strip away many good things from us and take us away from that abundance of things to which we are accustomed. And

this too estranges us from death: that we know what is here before us, but don't know what the things are like that we will cross over into, and we dread the unknown. Then too our fear of darkness is a natural fear, and death is thought to be leading us into darkness. So, even if death is an "indifferent," it's not the kind of thing that can be easily ignored. The mind must be hardened by a great training program to endure to look on it and see it approach.

Death ought to be scorned more than it customarily is. We take many things about it on faith, and the talents of many strive to increase its ill reputation. There are descriptions of a subterranean prison-house, and a realm shrouded in eternal night, in which

the huge door-guard of Orcus,
stretched out over half-eaten bones in a
gore-spattered cave,
barks forever to frighten the bloodless
shades of the dead.⁵

And even if you believe that these are fables, and that nothing remains in the afterlife to frighten the dead, a different terror creeps in: people are just as afraid of being in the underworld as of not being anywhere.

With these things working against us, poured into our ears over long stretches of time, why would it not be glorious to die courageously—one of the greatest achievements of the human mind? The mind will never strive for virtue if it thinks death is an evil thing; it will, though, if it considers death an indifferent. (*Epistle* 82.10–17)

It's fitting for you to experience pain, and thirst, and hunger, and old age—if, that is, a long delay in the human world befalls you—and illness, and loss, and death. But there's no reason to trust those who make a great din all around you: nothing of these things is bad, nothing is unbearable or harsh. Fear attaches to them only by consensus. You fear death, but your fear is only of a rumor, and what could be more foolish than a man who's afraid of words? Our friend Demetrius⁶ often says that the words of the ignorant issue from the same place as the rumblings of their guts. "What matter to me," he says, "whether they sound off from up top or from down below?"

It's altogether mad to fear being disgraced by the disgraceful. And likewise, just as you have no cause to fear evil rumors, so you have none to fear the things you would not fear unless rumor had commanded it. No good man would take harm from getting spattered by nasty rumors, right? Death too has a bad reputation; but let's not allow that to harm it in our eyes. None of those who bring charges against it have ever tried it, and it's impudent to condemn what you know nothing of. But you *do* know, at least, how many have found

death helpful; how many it has released from tortures, poverty, lamentation, punishments, fatigue. We are in no one's power, if death is in *our* power. (*Epistle* 91.18–21)

The passage below is preceded by a description of the celestial plane of serene contemplation to which the philosopher's mind can rise. In its final sentence, Seneca demonstrates one of his greatest rhetorical talents, a sharp eye for trenchant, pointed analogies.

When the mind raises itself to this sublime level, it becomes a manager, not a lover, of the body, as though this were its necessary burden; it does not become subject to what it was put in charge of. No free man is slave to the body. No need to mention the other masters that emerge from an excessive concern over it; the body's own dominion is gloomy and demanding. The man of temperate mind leaves his body, the great-minded man⁷ leaps out of it; no one asks what its end will be, after it's been left behind, but just as we ignore the clippings from our beards and hair, just so, that divine sort of mind, as it prepares to leave its human form, judges that the destination of its container—whether fire <burns>⁸ it, or earth covers it, or wild beasts tear it apart—matters as little to it as the afterbirth does to an infant. (*Epistle* 92.33–34)

III. HAVE NO REGRETS

In his earliest surviving work, the Consolation to Marcia, Seneca took on the stern challenge of convincing a mother not to be grieved by the loss of a son. In this and other works, Seneca insists, using various arguments, that the value we place on length of life, and our sense that something has been lost when life is cut short, are fundamentally mistaken.

“He died too soon, still a youth.” Suppose he had still had ahead of him—well, reckon up the longest that’s allowed to a human being to keep going. How long is it? We are born into the briefest space of time, soon to make way for the next arrivals.... Am I speaking only of our life spans, which, <we know,>¹ roll on with incredible speed? Consider the ages of cities: you’ll see how even the ones that take pride in their antiquity have stood only a short time. All human affairs are short, transitory, bounded in a negligible space of endless time. We consider this earth, with its cities, peoples, and rivers, enclosed by a circle of sea, as a tiny dot, if it’s compared with all of time—time, that stretches out longer than the world, especially since the world’s age is redoubled so many times within its span.² What difference does it make to extend something, if the amount of added time is little more than nothing? There’s only one way we can say that the life we live is long: if it’s enough. You can name for me vigorous men, men whose old age has become legendary; you can count off their sets of a hundred and ten years; when you let your mind roam across all of time, there’s no difference between the longest and the shortest life, if you survey how long a person lived and compare it with how long he *didn’t* live. (*To Marcia* 21.1–3)

In the four Epistles below, each presented mostly or wholly complete, Seneca strives to convince his readers that life should be measured by quality, not quantity, and that prolongation of life is not desirable in and of itself. This point, so clear cut yet so difficult to embrace, is fundamental to his philosophy. Other kinds of enjoyment, or physical experience, have a natural terminus, a point at which we are content to have them cease. We should strive to reach a similar satiety of living, as Seneca claims that he himself has done.

Dear Lucilius,

Let’s cease to want what we wanted. For my part, I arrange things such that, being an old man, I don’t want the same things I did as a child. My days have this one goal, as do my nights; this is my task and

my study, to put an end to old evils. I make it so that my day is a small version of my whole life. I don't, by Hercules, grab at it as though it were my last one, but I look upon it as though it *could* be my last. Indeed I'm writing this letter now as though death were coming to call for me in the very midst of writing it; I'm ready to depart. I enjoy my life thus far because I don't spend too much time measuring how long all this will remain.

Before I became old, I took care to live well; in old age I take care to die well. And dying well means dying willingly.... Let's compose our minds such that we want whatever the situation demands, and in particular that we contemplate our end without sadness. We must prepare for death before life. Our life is well furnished, yet we're greedy for its furnishings; something always seems to be lacking, and always will. It's not years nor days, but the mind, that determines that we've lived enough. I, my dearest Lucilius, have lived as much as is enough. Full, I await my death. Farewell. (*Epistle* 61)

Tullius Marcellinus, whom you knew very well, a quiet young man who soon became an old man, was taken ill with a disease that, though not without remedy, was long lasting and discomfiting and made many demands on him; so he began to weigh the possibility of death. He gathered together a large group of friends. Each of them, out of timidity, either urged on him the same thing he would have urged on himself, or else played the flatterer and yes-man, and gave the advice he guessed would be more pleasing to the one weighing his options. But our Stoic friend³—an outstanding fellow, and a brave and vigorous man, to praise him in the words with which he deserves to be praised—advised him the best, as it seems to me. He began as follows: “Marcellinus, don't torment yourself as though you were pondering a great matter. Living is not a great matter; all your slaves do it, and all the animals. To die honorably, prudently, bravely—now *that* is great. Consider how long it is now that you've been doing the same things; food, sleep, the act of love—this is the cycle we move through. So it's not just a prudent or brave or wretched man, but even one who's merely fussy, who might want to die.”

The man no longer needed a spokesman, but rather, an assistant; the slaves refused to obey.⁴ So he began by taking away their fear; he pointed out that the household staff only got into trouble when it was unclear whether the master's death was his own choice. Otherwise, he said, it would have set just as bad an example to kill a master as to prevent him. Then he turned to Marcellinus himself, advising him that it would be not inhumane, just as at the conclusion of a dinner party the leftovers are divided among the attendants, so now, at the conclusion of life, to offer something to those who had been his

assistants throughout life. Marcellinus was a man of easygoing mind, and generous even when his own estate was at stake, so he parceled out little amounts to his weeping slaves, and freely offered comfort to them.

He didn't need a sword, or the spilling of blood. He fasted for three days, and then ordered a tent to be set up in his bedroom. A bath was then brought in; he lay in it a long time, and as hot water was added, he slipped away, little by little, not without a certain pleasure (as he said)—the pleasure that a gentle loss of consciousness, not unknown to us (whose mind has sometimes slipped away),⁵ can bring.

I've digressed, but the story is one you will find not unpleasing, for you will learn that the death of a man who was your friend was neither difficult nor painful. Although he made a conscious decision to die, he nonetheless left the world in the gentlest way, and merely slipped out of life. But the story will not be without its applications, for necessity often drives such instances. Often we ought to die but don't wish to, or are dying but don't wish to. No one is so naïve as not to recognize that he must die at some point, yet when he approaches that point he turns back, trembles, pleads. But wouldn't a man seem to you the greatest of all fools, if he wept because for a thousand years previously, he had not been alive? He's just as great a fool if he weeps because he won't live for a thousand years to come. It's just the same: you won't exist, just as you didn't exist; neither past nor future is yours. You were thrust into this brief moment; how long will you prolong it? Why weep? What are you looking for? Your efforts are wasted.

Stop hoping to bend the fates of the gods
by prayer.⁶

Those fates are determined and fixed, guided by a great and eternal necessity. You'll go to the same place that all go. What's so strange about that? You were born under this law; it happened to your father, your mother, your ancestors, everyone before you, everyone after you. An unbreakable sequence, which no effort can alter, binds and tows all things. How great a throng of those yet to die will follow your footsteps! How great a crowd will accompany you! You would bear up more bravely, I imagine, if many thousands of things were dying along with you. In fact, many thousands—both men and animals—are giving up the ghost in all kinds of ways, at the very moment when you are hesitating to die. Don't you think you are going to arrive someday where you were always headed? No journey is without an endpoint.

Do you suppose I'm now going to recount the examples of great men? I'll tell you of youths instead. There's that Spartan whom legend tells of, still a boy, who, when captured by enemies, shouted, in his

native Doric dialect, “I won’t be a slave!” and then made good on his words: the first time he was ordered to perform a slavish and demeaning task—he was told to bring the chamberpot—he broke his skull by dashing it against a wall. That’s how near at hand freedom is, so should anyone be a slave? Wouldn’t you rather your son die like that, than live to old age through inaction? Why then are you troubled, when dying bravely is a task even for boys?

Let’s say you refuse to follow; you’ll be led against your will. So make your own the rules that belong to another power. You won’t take up the boy’s attitude and say, “I am no slave”? You poor man—you’re a slave to people, to things, to life (for a life lived without the courage to die is slavery). What do you have to look forward to? You’ve exhausted those pleasures that delay and detain you in life.⁷ There’s nothing you would find new, nothing with which you’re not sated to the point of disgust. You know the taste of wine and of mead. It doesn’t matter whether a hundred amphoras’ worth passes through your bladder, or a thousand; you’re just a wineskin. You know very well the taste of the oyster and the mullet; your self-indulgence has set nothing aside, untried, for coming years. Yet *these* are the things you are torn away from only against your will.

What else is there that you might be pained to see torn away from you? Your friends? But do you know how to be a friend? Your country? Do you value that highly enough to postpone your dinner for? The sunlight? You’d snuff that out if you could; for what have you ever done that’s worthy of light? Admit it: it’s not the yearning for the senate house, or for the forum, or even for the natural world that makes you reluctant to die; it’s the grocery market you leave behind unwillingly, a place from which you’ve left nothing behind. You fear death; but look how you scorn it, amid your banquet of mushrooms!⁸ You want to live, but do you know how? You’re afraid to die: why is that? Isn’t this life of yours a death?

Julius Caesar, when going along the Via Latina, was met by one from a file of guarded prisoners, a man whose beard trailed down to his chest, who asked him for death. “So you’re living now?” Caesar said. That’s how we must respond to those whom death is coming to aid. “You’re afraid to die, but are you living now?” “But I want to live,” the man says; “I’m doing honorable things. I don’t want to leave behind the duties of life, which I’m carrying out faithfully and diligently.” What, do you not realize that dying, too, is one of those duties of life? You’re not abandoning any duty. There’s no set number of these, no limit you have to reach.

There’s no life that’s not short. If you examine the nature of things, even the life of Nestor is short, or that of Sattia, who ordered inscribed on her tombstone that she had lived ninety-nine years. You see in her

someone glorying in a long old age. But who could have endured her, if she had filled out a full century? Just as with storytelling, so with life: it's important how well it is done, not how long. It doesn't matter at what point you call a halt. Stop wherever you like; only put a good closer on it.⁹ Farewell. (*Epistle* 77.5–20)

Dear Lucilius,

In the letter you wrote complaining about the death of the philosopher Metronax, saying that he could have and should have lived longer, I missed the even disposition you have in abundance in every matter, and toward every person, but lack in this one matter, just as everyone lacks it. I've seen many who kept a calm mind when facing human beings, but none who did so facing gods. Instead, we berate Fate every day: "Why was that man taken off in the middle of his journey? Why is that other *not* taken off? Why does he prolong his old age, making it troublesome to himself and others?"

Which do you think more fair, I ask you: that you obey Nature, or that Nature obey you? What difference does it make how fast you depart a place that must, without doubt, be departed? We ought to take care that we live not a long time, but enough; for we need Fate to help us live long, but our own minds, to live enough. Life is long if it is full, and it gets filled when the mind returns its own good to itself and passes over into control of itself. In what way were eighty years, passed in sloth, a benefit to someone? He didn't live but only lingered in life; he didn't die late, but died for a long time. "He lived eighty years." Yes, but it matters up to what point of death you are counting. "He died in his prime." Yes, but he had carried out the duties of a good citizen, a good friend, and a good son; he lacked nothing in any of these paths. His lifetime was cut short, but his life was completed. "He lived for eighty years." No, he merely *was* for eighty years, unless you say "he lived" in the same way we say that trees live....

As for myself, I wouldn't refuse the addition of more years. But if my span of life is cut short, I will say that I lacked nothing that would render that life happy. I did not prepare for that far-off day that my greedy hopes had promised would be my last, but rather I regarded every day as though it *were* my last....

Just as a man of smaller stature can be complete, so a life can be complete in a smaller stretch of time. Life span stands outside our control. It's not in my power how long I will exist, but rather how long I will *truly* exist. Demand this of me: that I not pass through a base life span as though passing through shadows, but that I live my life, not skip past it.

What's the most complete span of a life, you ask? To live until attaining wisdom. Whoever reaches that goal ends at a point not

furthest, but greatest. Let that man rejoice boldly in the truth, and give thanks to the gods, and to himself among these; let him credit the cosmos for his creation, and deservedly so, for he returns to the cosmos a better life than the one he got. He has set the template of the good man, and revealed its measure and its quality. If he had added anything to it,¹⁰ the addition would have been similar to what came before.

How long is our life?¹¹ We have enjoyed an understanding of all things; we know from what origins Nature brings itself forth, how it orders the world, through what changes it recalls the seasons, how it contains everything that will ever come to be and makes itself its own endpoint; we know that the stars move by their own force, that nothing is stationary except the earth, and that everything else races along at constant speed; we know how the moon outruns the sun and why, though slower, it leaves the faster object behind; we know how it takes on or loses its light, what cause brings on night and what restores the day. A journey awaits,¹² to where you can see these things more closely.

The wise man says, "It's not for this that I depart with greater courage, that I think I have a clear path toward my gods. I deserve to be admitted to their company, and I have already been among them; I have sent my mind there, and they have sent theirs to me. But supposing I am destroyed and that nothing of my human nature remains after death: I possess a great mind nonetheless, even if it's not going anywhere when I depart...."

Surely you don't think the man happier who died on the last day of the games, than he who died in the middle?¹³ By no less an interval than *that* does each of us precede the next to die. Death makes its way through all; the killer follows on the heels of his victim. We get most anxious over the thing that is least important. What does it matter how long you dodge the thing you cannot escape? Farewell. (*Epistle 93*)

Dear Lucilius,

Every day, every hour reveals how we are nothing, and brings new arguments to convince those who have forgotten their fragility; it compels those who have contemplated eternal things to look toward death. What is this prelude driving at, you ask? You once knew Cornelius Senecio, an illustrious and dutiful Roman knight. He advanced himself from slender origins, and was coasting downhill toward better things (for stature increases more easily than it gets started). Wealth, also, tends to linger a long time in poverty's realm, and hangs on there even while it is struggling out; but Senecio was on the point of gaining riches, led there by two very effective things,

expertise in getting wealth and in managing it; either one might have made him rich. This man of highest thriftiness, who cared for his physical health no less than for his estate, after coming to see me in the morning (as was his habit),¹⁴ and then sitting by the side of a suffering, terminally ill friend all day and (with greater dejection) into the night, and then taking a cheerful meal, was seized by a sudden attack of ill health—angina—and barely kept breathing, through choked airways, until the dawn. Thus only a few short hours after he had carried out the duties of a sound and healthy man, he was dead.

He was taken off—a man who was managing business on both land and sea, who had made a start in civic affairs and left no source of revenue untapped, at the consummate moment of good fortune, at the flood tide of incoming wealth.

Sow your pear trees, Meliboeus, and set
your vines in a row.¹⁵

How foolish to set things in order, when we're not lords of tomorrow! What madness is the far-reaching hope of those who begin things! "I'll buy things, build things, lend and collect, accrue honors, and finally I'll spend my worn-out, filled-up old age in idle leisure." Listen to me: everything is doubtful, even for the fortunate; no one should promise himself anything regarding the future; the thing held in the hands slips away, and chance cuts short the very hour we hold before us. Time proceeds by a settled law, but it moves through darkness. What does it matter to me that something is clear to Nature, if it's opaque to me? We plan long sea voyages and late returns to our native land after traversing foreign shores; military campaigns and the slow payoff of building fortifications; governorships and attainment of one office after another—meanwhile death stands by our side; and since death is never contemplated except as another's fate, instances of mortality pile up before us but don't abide any longer than our astonishment at them.

But what could be more foolish than to marvel that something will happen on a certain day, when it could happen on *any* day? Our endpoint is fixed where the inescapable necessity of the fates has planted it, but none of us knows how far off from that endpoint our course lies. Therefore let's shape our minds as though we'd arrived at the last lap....

Make haste to live, Lucilius, and think each of your days to be an individual life. The man who accustoms himself to this way of thought, for whom life is complete each day, is free of worry; but to those who live for hope, each moment, as it draws near, slips away, and in steals greediness and, the thing most wretched and cause of all most wretched things, the fear of death. Thence comes that most

debased prayer of Maecenas,¹⁶ in which he accepts weakness and disfigurement and the freshly sharpened stakes of the cross, so long as, among these evils, he is spared the breath of life:

Make my hand feeble,
make my foot feeble;
give me a swelling hunchback,
knock out my loosening teeth;
as long as life remains, it's fine.
Just preserve my life, even if
I sit on a sharpened stake.¹⁷

Here, he desires the thing that would bring the most wretchedness (had it happened), and seeks a postponement of torment as though it were life itself.... Imagine that Vergil had once recited to him this line:

Is it so very wretched a thing, this dying?¹⁸

He desires that the worst of evils, things that are the hardest to endure, be continued and prolonged, and for what reward? A longer life, as it seems. But what is living, if it's only a lengthy dying? Is there anyone who would want to be mutilated by tortures, to perish limb by limb, and to give up the ghost many times on the rack rather than simply breathe it out a single time? Is there anyone who would prefer, when driven forward to that grim piece of wood, already bent, enfeebled, and puffed out into vile swellings of his chest and shoulders, having amassed many causes of death even apart from the cross, to drag out a life that will feel so many torments?

Go ahead, then—deny that it's a great gift of Nature that we must die. But many are ready to swap worse things for it: to betray a friend in order to live longer, or to hand over their children, with their own hands, for lechery, just to see the next dawn—a dawn that's privy to their many sins.

This desire for life must be knocked out of us. We must learn that it makes no difference when you undergo the thing that must be undergone some time or other; that it matters how well you live, not how long. And often the “well” lies in not living long.¹⁹ Farewell. (*Epistle* 101)

IV. SET YOURSELF FREE

In the passage below, Seneca again consoles Marcia on the death of her teenaged son. At one point he also refers to Marcia's father, who some years earlier had starved himself to death to escape persecution by the emperor Tiberius; his suicide was completed just as his senate colleagues, obeying the will of the emperor, were voting to have him executed. That sort of death, freely chosen rather than imposed by a greater power, had particular resonance for Seneca in the era of Caligula, during which the Consolation to Marcia was likely written, and again in the second half of Nero's reign, during which he wrote the Epistles. Both emperors were prone to paranoia and forced many citizens they suspected of disloyalty, including ultimately Seneca himself, to take their own lives or else face both execution and confiscation of property. That recurring pattern helped define suicide as a path to self-liberation, in Seneca's mind.

Oh, how ignorant they are of their troubles, those who do not praise and await death as the finest device of Nature! Whether it closes off happiness or drives away disaster; whether it ends the satiety and torpor of the old, or reduces the bloom of youth when better things are looked for, or calls back adolescence before it embarks on harsher paths, it is an end for all and a remedy for many, and for some the answer to a prayer, better deserved by no one more than those to whom it comes before it is summoned. Death releases those enslaved to a hated master; it lightens the chains of prisoners; it frees from prison those whom an unopposable authority had forbidden to leave; it demonstrates, to exiles who bend their eyes and thoughts always to their homeland, that there's no difference in what nation one makes one's home; it evens everything out, when Fortune has made a bad division of shared property and given one man to another, though both were born with equal rights;¹ it's the point past which no one ever again does another's bidding, the state in which no one is aware of his lowliness, the path which is closed to no one, the end your father, Marcia, eagerly desired; it's death, I declare, that makes being born something other than a torment, that allows me not to collapse in the face of menacing events, that lets me keep my mind intact and in control of itself; I have a court of appeal. Lo, over here, I see crosses of torture, and not all of one kind, but different ones from different makers. For some men hang others upside down, head facing the earth; others drive a stake through the genitalia; still others stretch the arms on the crossbeam.² I see the "lyres,"³ I see beatings, and

instruments devised for every different limb and joint;⁴ but I see death as well. Over there, there are bloodthirsty enemies and imperious fellow citizens; but I see death is there also. Slavery is no burden, provided that, if your master disgusts you, you can cross over into freedom with a single step. I hold you dear, life, by virtue of the boon of death. (*To Marcia* 20.1)

The passage below, from Seneca's early work De Ira ("On Anger"), represents his most striking equation of suicide and personal freedom. It comes directly after Seneca's discussion of two Near Eastern tyrants, Cambyses and Astyages, who had committed outrages on their chief ministers: Cambyses had killed the son of Prexaspes by using him as an archery target, while Astyages had fed to Harpagus a stew of his own butchered children. These stories, and Seneca's response to them here, take on special point given that Seneca would later (perhaps soon after this passage was composed) become a chief minister himself, at the court of the young Nero.

We will not urge our readers to follow the commands of torturers; we will show instead that, in every kind of enslavement, the road to freedom lies open. If one's mind is ill and wretched from its own failings, it can make an end of its own sufferings. I will say to one who has fallen in with a king who fires arrows into the chests of his friends, or to another whose master gluts fathers on the guts of their children, "What do you groan for, senseless man? What hope do you have that some foe will liberate you—by destroying your whole family—or some king will wing his way to you, extending his power from afar? Anywhere you cast your glance, the end of your troubles can be found. You see that high, steep place? From there comes the descent to freedom. You see that sea, that river, that well? Freedom lies there, at its bottom. You see that short, gnarled, unhappy tree? Freedom hangs from it. Look to your own neck, your windpipe, your heart; these are the paths out of slavery. Are these exits I show you too laborious, demanding of resolve and strength? Then, if you ask what is the path to freedom, I say: any vein in your body." (*On Anger* 3.15.3)

Seneca often pointed to the death of Marcus Porcius Cato, an event that took place a century before his own time, as a model of self-liberation by suicide. Cato, a devoted Stoic, had opposed Julius Caesar both in the senate and on the battlefield, in hopes of preventing Rome from becoming an autocracy. After he lost a crucial battle in North Africa, near Utica, Cato withdrew to a private room and disemboweled himself with a sword. His friends found him still alive and had a doctor sew up his wound, but Cato resolutely pulled out the stitches and finished himself off. Seneca found this death exemplary because of its political motivation, its

philosophic inspiration (Cato had been reading Plato's Phaedo, a dialogue that discusses the immortality of the soul, just before undertaking his deed), and above all because of the resolve required to bring it to completion.

I tell you, I can't see anything Jupiter would consider more lovely anywhere on earth, if he should turn his attention here, than the sight of Cato, standing upright amid public disasters even though his faction had been wrecked more than once. "Let everything submit to the control of one man," he said, "let the lands be guarded by troops and the seas by fleets, let Caesar's soldiers blockade the ports, yet Cato has a means of escape: he'll forge a broad path to freedom with a single hand. This sword here, thus far harmless and free from the taint of civil war, will finally accomplish brave and noble deeds; it will give to Cato the freedom it could not give to his homeland. Go forth, my soul, toward the deed you have long contemplated; tear yourself away from human affairs. Petreius and Juba have met in combat, and lie dead, each killed by the other's hand;⁵ that's a bold and illustrious pact of death, but not the kind that suits *our* greatness. It's just as base for Cato to seek death at another's hands as it is to seek life." It's clear to me that the gods looked on with great joy while that man, his own harshest avenger, took thought for others' safety and helped those who left him prepare their escape; while he pored over his studies in his final night; while he stuck his sword into his holy breast; while he scattered his own organs and drew out with his hand that beatified soul, a thing too good to be tainted by a metal blade. For this reason, I could believe, his wound was not sure or effective enough: to watch Cato once was not enough for the immortal gods; his virtue was held back and recalled,⁶ so that it might reveal itself in a more difficult role. To seek death a second time takes a greater mind than to enter it once. Why else would the gods not have looked on with approval as the one they nurtured got away by means of a brilliant and memorable escape? Death sanctifies those whose exit wins praise even from those in whom it inspires fear. (*On Providence* 2.9)

Having explored Cato's demise in the opening section of On Providence, above, Seneca returns to the idea of suicide as self-liberation in the closing section of the work, where an unnamed god is speaking to humankind.

"Above all, I took care that no one would detain you against your will; the exit stands open. If you don't want to fight, you're allowed to flee. Thus out of all the things I wanted you to go through by necessity, I made dying the easiest. I put your soul on a downhill slope. <If> it's a drawn-out death,⁷ just wait a bit, and you'll see how short and easy is the path to freedom. I put much shorter delays in your way as you leave the world than as you enter. Otherwise Fortune would have held

great power over you, if the human race took as long dying as being born. Let every time and every place instruct you on how easy it is to renounce Nature and to press back on it its gift. Among the very altars and the solemn rites of those making sacrifice—there where life is prayed for—study death. See how the sleek bodies of bulls are felled by a small wound, and the blow of a human hand dispatches animals of great strength. The ligaments of the neck are severed by a small blade, and when that joint that connects the head and neck is cut, the creature's bulk, however huge, collapses. The breath of life does not lurk in some deep place; it does not need to be dug out with tools. Your organs don't need to be searched out by a stab wound deep within. Death is as near as can be. I set no fixed spot for these killing blows; wherever you want to strike, the way lies open. That thing we call dying, the moment when the soul leaves the body, is too quick for the speed of its exit to be felt. If the noose breaks the neck, or if water blocks your breathing, or if the hard ground beneath you breaks your head as you fall, or if a draught of flame cuts off the course of your returning breath—whatever form death takes, it comes quickly. So aren't you ashamed? You fear for so long that which takes only a short time!" (*On Providence* 6.7)

As Seneca aged and his physical condition deteriorated, he increasingly confronted the question of self-euthanasia. His feelings on the subject were conflicted, and not always consistent. Whereas in Epistle 77 (part III), Seneca seemed to approve of the suicide of Tullius Marcellinus, who had been plagued by a painful but temporary illness, he says in Epistle 58 below that only in the case of an incurable condition would suicide be justified. Then in the letter that follows (Epistle 70), presented here in its entirety, Seneca explores both sides of the problem of self-euthanasia and decides that the choice is contingent on circumstances.

On this question, whether one ought to disdain the exigencies of old age and not wait for their end but make an end with one's hand, I'll tell you what I think. The man who lingers and awaits his fate is near to being a coward, just as the drinker who drains an entire amphora, and even sucks down the dregs, is too much devoted to wine. But that raises the question whether the end of life is the dregs or something very clear and fluid, if, that is, the mind stays free of damage, the senses stay intact and give delight to the spirit, and the body is not worn out or dead before its time; it makes a great difference whether what one prolongs is life or death.

But if one's body becomes useless for performing its functions, is it not fitting to draw the struggling mind out of it? And, perhaps, the deed must be done a little before it ought, lest, when it ought to be done, you're no longer able to do it. And when the danger of living

badly is greater than that of dying soon, only a fool would not buy his way out of a great risk at the price of a small moment of time. A very long old age has brought few men to death's threshold without debilities, whereas for many, life lies there motionless, unable to make use of what makes it life. Do you think there is anything crueller to lose from life than the right to end it?

Don't begrudge me a hearing, as though my opinion were meant for your own case; take the full measure of my words. I won't depart from old age as long as it leaves me intact, or at least whole in that better portion of myself. But if it begins to destroy my mind and to tear away parts of it, if what is left to me is not life but mere breath, I'll jump out of the rotten and collapsing building. I won't use death to escape illness, so long as the illness is curable and does not occlude my mind. I won't use my hand against myself merely on account of pain; to die for that reason is to admit defeat. But if I know that my condition must be endured forevermore, I'll leave, not because of the pain itself, but because it will cut me off from everything that gives one a reason to live. It's a weak and idle man who dies on account of pain, but it's a fool who lives for pain's sake. (*Epistle* 58.32–36)

Dear Lucilius,

After a long time away, I have visited Pompeii, your hometown. I was brought back within view of my young adulthood; whatever I had done as a youth, it seemed I was able to do again or had just recently done. We have sailed on past in the voyage of life, Lucilius; just as, when one is at sea (as Vergil says),

the lands and the towns fall away,⁹

so have we watched drop from sight, as time sails hurriedly on, first our boyhood, then our adolescence, then whatever lies between youth and mid-life, spanning the gap between them, then the best years of old age, until at last the common end of all humankind hoves in view. We are deluded to think this a perilous reef. It's a harbor, sometimes to be sought, never to be shunned; someone who drifted there, in the first years of life, has no more cause to complain than one who sailed there at speed. For as you know, lazy breezes sport with some men, holding back their progress and tiring them with the boredom of a gentle calm, while an unceasing gale sweeps other men along most swiftly. Consider that the same thing happens to us: life brings some very quickly to where even those who tarry must eventually go; others it first tenderizes and ripens. Life, as you know, is not a thing that should be held onto forever. Merely to live is not in itself good, but rather, to live *well*.

Thus the sage will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can.

He'll examine where he will live, with whom, and how, and what he will do. He'll think about what kind of life is his, not what length. If a host of troubles arise and roil his serenity, he'll set himself free; and he won't do this only in the final exigency; rather, when his fortune first begins to seem suspect to him, he'll look around to see whether he's at a good stopping point. He judges that it makes no difference whether he fashions his end or receives it, whether it happens later or sooner. He does not fear it as he would a great setback, for no one can lose much out of a tiny dribble. It's of no matter whether one dies sooner, or later; dying well or badly is what matters. And to die well is to escape the danger of living badly. Thus I think that that man of Rhodes spoke a most unmanly word; when he had been thrown into a hole by the tyrant, and was being kept alive like some animal, he said, to someone who urged him to stop eating, "So long as one lives, one must hold onto every hope." Though there's truth to that, life should not be bought at any price....

It's folly to die from the fear of death. Your executioner is coming; wait for him. Why get a head start? Why take on the task of inflicting cruelty that belongs to another? Are you jealous of your butcher, or do you seek to spare him his efforts? Socrates could have ended his life by fasting and abstinence, rather than dying by poison; yet he spent thirty days in prison awaiting death, not in the belief that anything was possible—as though such a long stretch of time might give room for hopes of all kinds—but so that he might submit to the laws, and allow his friends to take joy in the last days of Socrates. Nothing could have been sillier than to have contempt for death but also to fear poison!

Scribonia, a solid, serious woman, was the paternal aunt of Drusus Libo, a youth high in rank but low in intelligence, who had greater hopes for himself than anyone of that time had reason to entertain, greater indeed than he himself had reason to hold at *any* time. When Drusus was carried out of the senate, ailing, lying on a litter, with only a few to attend him (for his inner circle had wickedly deserted a man who was no longer a defendant but a terminal case), he began to consider whether to take his own life or wait for death to arrive.¹⁰ Scribonia said to him, "What joy is there for you in taking care of someone else's job?" But she failed to sway him; he did away with himself with his own hands. And he had reason: if he had lived another three or four days, doomed to die by the sentence his enemy had passed, he would indeed have taken care of someone else's job.

One can't generalize and say that, in a situation where an external force has declared the need to die, death should either be awaited or embraced; there are many factors that can make one incline to one path or the other. If one form of death includes torture, while the

other is easy and uncomplicated, then why not lay one's hands upon the latter? Just as I choose a ship when going on a voyage, or a house when going to move in somewhere, so I choose a form of death when getting ready to exit from life. Just as a longer life is not necessarily better, a longer death is necessarily worse.

We ought to let our minds guide us in death more than in any other matter. A person should follow impulse when making an exit, whether he desires a blade, or a noose, or some kind of concoction to fill his veins, he should go ahead and break the chains of slavery. Each of us ought to seek a life that wins approval from others, but a death, from himself. The best one is the one that pleases him. These are foolish thoughts: "Someone will say I didn't do it bravely enough, or too recklessly, or that there was another kind of death that had more spirit to it." Think instead that the plan you have in your hands is something that report is not concerned with. Look to this alone, that you get yourself away from fortune as quickly as you can. Otherwise there *will* be people there to judge your deed harshly.

You will even find those who lay claim to wisdom who say that force must not be used against one's own life, and who judge it a sin to become one's own murderer. The end that Nature decreed, they say, must be awaited. But whoever says this doesn't see that he is blocking the road to freedom. The law of eternity has done nothing better for us than to supply only one entrance into life, but many exits from it. Should I await the cruelty either of illness or of humanity, when I can escape from amid my torments and scatter the things that oppose me? This is the one thing in life we can't complain of: it detains no one. The human condition is a good one, in that no one is unhappy except by his own fault. Are you pleased? Then live. Are you displeased? Then you are allowed to return from whence you came. You often let your blood to ease a headache; a vein is cut right through as a means of weight loss. It takes no deep wound to split apart your vitals. The road to that great freedom is opened with a small blade, and safety is gained in a snip.¹¹ What then makes us slow and passive? None of us considers when we ought to depart from our little abode; thus the comfort of the place, and its familiarity, detains its old tenants even as their injuries mount. Do you want to gain freedom, in spite of your body? Then dwell in it like one about to move out. Put it to yourself that you will one day have to do without this rooming house; that thought will strengthen you against the need for leaving.

But how will those who eagerly desire everything, without limit, be forced to consider their own end? No other thing is rehearsed for as vitally as this one; all other matters are, it may turn out, practiced needlessly. Our mind is prepared for poverty, yet our wealth is secure.

We have steeled ourselves to scorn pain, but the happy condition of our sound and healthy body has never required from us a test of this virtue. We teach ourselves to endure the longing for those we have lost, yet fortune has kept safe and well all those whom we loved. In this one case, the day that demands we put our lessons into practice will someday arrive.

There's no reason to suppose that only great men had the strength with which to break the shackles of human slavery; there's no reason to think that it can't happen unless done by a Cato, who dragged out with his hand whatever part of his life he did not liberate with the sword.¹² Even men of the lowliest station have escaped into safety with enormous effort, and when they were not allowed an opportune means of dying, nor the chance to choose the implements of death to suit their own preference, they seized on whatever came their way and used their own powers to make weapons out of what was not naturally harmful. Just recently, in the beast-fighting shows, a German, when he was being readied for the morning program,¹³ drew apart to relieve himself—no other privacy was permitted to him, without a guard—and jammed a piece of wood with a sponge attached, placed there for the cleansing of one's private parts, into his windpipe and, with his throat blocked off, thrust out the breath of life. "That was an insult to death; in a word, too unclean and indecent!" But what is more foolish than to die fastidiously? Brave man, worthy to have been given a choice of the means of death! How bravely he would have used his sword, how spiritedly he would have hurled himself into the yawning depths of the sea or down from a rocky cliff! Deprived on every hand, he found a way to give himself a weapon and a path to death, so that you may learn that nothing stands in the way of dying except the will to do it. Let each of us reach our own judgment about the deed of this very keen man, so long as this is agreed: that the foulest death is still preferable to the cleanest slavery.

Having begun using sordid examples, I'll keep on going, for each of us will demand more from ourselves if we see that this thing—death—can be looked down on even by those who are themselves most looked down on. We consider that the Catos, and Scipios, and others we often hear about with admiration, occupy a place beyond imitation. But I will now prove that their virtue has as many exemplars in the wild beast spectacles as among the leaders of the civil wars. A short while ago, while being brought to the morning games, under guard, a certain fellow let his head droop as though he were nodding off with sleep bearing down on him, just far enough that he could stick his head between the spokes, and then held himself in place in his seat until the rotation of the wheel broke his neck. Thus he escaped by way of the same vehicle that was carrying him to be punished. Nothing

stands in the way if one wants to break free and leave; Nature keeps us lightly guarded. If the need to die permits it, look around and choose a gentle death; if there are many things ready to hand for obtaining freedom, then make a selection, and consider the most effective path to liberation; if circumstances are hard, then grab the nearest thing instead of waiting for the best, no matter whether it's unheard-of or strange. Whoever has the will to achieve death won't lack the ingenuity. You see how slaves of the lowest rank, when their pain has goaded them, are roused to action and elude the most attentive guards? It's a great man that not only decrees, but invents, his own death.

I promised you more examples from this same realm, the gladiatorial shows. In the second sea-battle show, one of the barbarians plunged into his own throat the spear that he had been given to use against opponents. "Why do I take so long to flee all forms of torture and mockery?" he said. "Why do I await death when I am equipped with a weapon?" This was a more impressive show, just as it's more honorable to teach how to die than to teach how to kill.

So then, if these downtrodden, violent minds possess some resource, won't those men have it too whose long contemplation and whose reason—the master of all things—have trained them to deal with such misfortunes? Reason teaches us that there are many ways to approach one's fate, but the same end for all, and that it doesn't matter at what point the thing that's coming begins. That same reasoning power advises you, if it's possible, to die <however you please, but if not,>¹⁴ to die however you can, and to attack yourself with whatever's available for doing violence. It's unjust to live by stealing the means, but it's a very fine thing to die by doing so. Farewell. (*Epistle 70*)

In most discussions of suicide, Seneca ignores the problem of the effect one's death will have on surviving kin and friends. In the passage below, uniquely, he acknowledges that even when one's own circumstances might make suicide an appropriate choice, one might have an obligation to others to live on. It is one of few passages in his writings that give any insight into his marriage to Pompeia Paulina, a woman many years his junior.

Dear Lucilius,

I made my escape to my place in Nomentanum—fleeing the city, you think? No, a fever, and one that was getting worse; it already had me in its grip. The doctor said it had begun with my pulse becoming uncertain and out of its normal rhythm. Right away I ordered my carriage to be got ready. I had to struggle to get out, with my Paulina holding me back.... She urges me to look after my health. Since I know that her spirit depends upon mine, I begin to look after myself,

that I might look after her.

Honorable emotions, after all, must be indulged. Sometimes, even if circumstances are bearing down on one, the spirit must be called back, even if it causes torment, and held back as it hovers on one's very lips, for the sake of one's nearest and dearest. A good man must live not as long as he wants, but as long as he ought. Whoever does not judge his wife and friends worth lingering longer in life, who is determined to die, is being too choosy. If the soul not only wants to die, but has even *begun* to, it should order itself to pause and to serve the needs of its family and friends. It's the mark of a great soul to turn back toward life for the sake of others; and great men have often done so. (*Epistle* 104.1–4)

Nothing seems more disgraceful to me than to wish for death. If you want to live, why wish to die? Or if you don't want to live, why do you ask the gods for that which they gave you when you were born? Just as it's been decided that you'll die sometime, even if you don't want to, so the power lies in your hands when you do; the first is imposed on you, the second is permitted to you. I read recently a most disgraceful opening line (and in the work of a learned man, by Hercules!): "Thus let me die as soon as possible," he said. You're mad—you're asking for what's already yours. "Thus let me die as soon as possible." Perhaps while you repeat these words, you'll advance to old age. Otherwise, what's the delay? No one holds you back. Go out by whatever path seems best; choose whatever part of the physical world you might bid to supply you an exit route. Truly, the very elements by which this world is governed—water, earth, and the breath of air—are all causes of living as much as routes of dying. "Thus let me die as soon as possible." What do you want that "as soon as possible" to be? What day will you schedule it for? It can come about sooner than you want! These are the words of a feeble mind, and one that tries to get our pity by uttering this imprecation. Whoever wishes to die doesn't want to. Ask the gods for life and health instead! If death really is what pleases you, this is the benefit it brings: to cease to want it. (*Epistle* 117.22–24)

V. BECOME A PART OF THE WHOLE

Seneca found great comfort in the universality of death and decay, not only for humanity but for all things; the earth itself would die, and be renewed, in a regular cycle repeating throughout time, according to Stoic cosmologic precepts that Seneca shared. In the two passages below, Seneca offers ideas of death's universality as consolations to grieving friends. The first is addressed to Marcia, who had lost a son; the second, to Polybius, a powerful freedman at the court of emperor Claudius, who had lost a brother.

Imagine, Marcia, that your father is speaking to you from that citadel in the sky.¹ ... “Why,” he says, “does mourning hold you in its grip for so long, my daughter? Why do you linger in such great ignorance of the truth, that you think your son has been unfairly dealt with—when he has gone, whole and sound, to join his ancestors, leaving his household also whole and sound? Don’t you realize what great whirlwinds Fortune uses to roil all things? Or that she shows a kind and gentle face to no one, except those who have the least dealings with her? Should I list for you those kings who would have been supremely happy, if death had only removed them from looming evils a bit sooner? Or the Roman leaders whose greatness will lack nothing if you only take away a portion of their life span? Or the very noble and brilliant men who have bent down with their necks laid bare for the blow of the soldier’s sword? Just look at your father and grandfather: *he* came into the power of an attacker he did not know, while I, allowing no one to act against me, abstaining from food, showed the world that I possessed as lofty a mind as had appeared from my writings.² Why should one who died most fortunately be mourned in our house for an extreme length of time?

“We all come together into one place, from where, no longer enveloped in deep night, we perceive that nothing in your world is as desirable as you thought, nor lofty, nor brilliant; rather, it’s all lowly, leaden, fraught, and lit by only a tiny portion of our light. I could tell you more: that here there are no weapons of war clashing in mutual rage, no fleets being smashed by fleets, no parricides either enacted or plotted, no forums roaring with lawsuits day in, day out; nothing lies hidden, but thoughts are revealed, hearts are open, and life stands where all can see, along with the overview of every age and of things yet to come.

“It was once a joy to me to write about the deeds of a single era,

done in a remote part of the world among a tiny group of people.³ Now I can contemplate so many centuries, such a chain and sequence of ages, the limitless series of years. I can look ahead to the empires that will arise and fall to ruin, the declines of great cities, the new ebbs and flows of the sea. If our common fate can help relieve your grief, then know: nothing will stand where it now stands, but the march of age will level all things and drag everything away with it. It makes a sport not just of humankind (for how small a portion they are of Fortune's power!), but of places, regions, segments of the world. It will level whole mountains, and elsewhere push new crags toward the sky; it will drain the seas, turn aside rivers, and dissolve the unity and fellowship of the human race, the connections between peoples cut off. Elsewhere, it will drag down cities into vast chasms, shake them with earthquakes, send plague-filled gusts up from the bottom, drown with inundations every dwelling, kill off all life on the flooded earth, scorch and burn up mortality with huge tongues of flame.⁴

"And when the time comes when the world, on its way to renewal, destroys itself, these things will strike themselves down with their own strength, and stars will crash into stars, and whatever now shines in an ordered array will blaze with a single fire, all matter set aflame. We too, the blessed souls who have been granted eternity, when god decides to fashion these things over again, will be a small addition to the enormous collapse; with all things sliding into ruin, we shall be changed back into our ancient components." (*To Marcia* 26.1)

You may complain, "But he was snatched away when I didn't expect it." Thus all are deceived by their own trust and a willful forgetfulness of mortality in the case of things they cherish. Nature promised no one that it would make an exception to necessity. Every day there pass before our eyes the funerals of the famous and the obscure, yet we are busy with other things, and we find a sudden surprise in the thing that, our whole life long, we were told was coming. It's not the unfairness of the fates, but the warped inability of the human mind to get enough of all things, that makes us complain of leaving that place to which we were admitted as a special favor. How much more just was he who, having learned of his son's death, spoke a word worthy of a great man: "I knew then, when I fathered him, that he would die." ... His son's death came as no news to him; for what news is it that someone has died whose whole life was nothing else than a journey toward death? "I knew then, when I fathered him, that he would die." Then he added something of even greater sagacity and insight: "And it was for *that* that I raised him."⁵ It's for *that* that we are all brought up; whoever is brought into life is destined for death. Let's rejoice in what will be given, but let's return it when we're asked for it

back. The fates will seize hold of one person now, another later, but they will overlook no one. Let the soul stand girded for battle; let it never fear what must be, let it always expect what's unknown.... There's no single end fixed for all; for one, life departs in mid-course, but abandons another at its very beginning, and barely dispatches a third who is already worn out with extreme old age and longing to go. Each in his or her own time, we all bend our course to the same place. Is it more stupid to ignore the law of mortality, or more impudent to reject it? I don't know. (*To Polybius* 11.1–4)

Despite his Stoic orientation, Seneca was interested in Epicurean theories about the atomic basis of the physical world. He sounds an Epicurean note in passages, like the one below, in which he imagines that the particles out of which human bodies are formed are indestructible, and after those bodies decay, will go on to form other substances.

There are fixed seasons by which all things progress; they must be born, grow, and perish. All the things that whirl through the sky above us, and the things below, on which we lean and take our place as though they were firm, will cease and be severed. There is nothing that does not grow old. Nature disperses these things, all to the same end, though after different intervals. Whatever is, will no longer be; it won't die, but will be undone.

For us, death is merely dissolution. We see only the things just before us; the dull mind, or one which has enslaved itself to the body, doesn't look ahead to what lies further off. We would more bravely endure our own end, and the ends of our kin, if we were anticipating that, just like everything else, so life and death change places by turns, and that the endless craft of the god who sets proper bounds to all things is turned toward this goal: to separate things that were bound together, and bind together those that became separated.

And so we will say as Marcus Cato did, after he had raced across time with his mind, "The whole human race, whatever is or will be, is condemned to death. All the cities that ever obtain wealth, or become the pride of foreign empires, will be razed by various sorts of destruction; someday people will wonder where they were. Wars will destroy some; others will succumb to idleness, and peace that has turned into sloth, and that thing that is lethal to great power, luxury. A tidal wave of the unforeseen sea will swamp all those fertile fields, or a slide of settling soil will drag them down into a chasm that suddenly yawns. What reason then for me to grieve or complain, if I depart just a short moment before these global ends? Let the great mind bow to the will of god, and bear without hesitation whatever the law of the universe decrees: either it will be released into a better life, to abide with divine things in a clearer and more peaceful way than

before, or else it will surely exist without anything to trouble it, if it gets mingled into nature and sent back to be part of the whole.” (Epistle 71.13–16)

The idea that death waited around every corner, ready to spring at every moment, might be disturbing to some, but to Seneca, gave peace of mind; why worry about what is wholly outside your control? These two final readings, both addressed to Seneca’s friend Lucilius, develop that train of thought. The first comes from the Moral Epistles, the great compilation of letters Seneca produced in his mid-sixties, just before his death; the second, from Natural Questions, a study of earth science also composed in Seneca’s last year or two of life.

You will soon see that some things are less to be feared precisely because they carry so much fear with them. Nothing is bad if it is final. Death is coming to you; it would be fearsome if it were able to abide with you, but it must either fail to find you, or come and then leave. “It’s hard,” you say, “to bring my mind to the disregard of my life.” But don’t you see how trivial are the reasons that others disregard theirs? One man has hanged himself outside the doors of his mistress; another has hurled himself from a roof, so that he might no longer hear his master shouting; another has plunged a sword in his innards, lest he be recaptured after an escape. Don’t you suppose that virtue can produce the same result as does an excess of fear? Life cannot be free from worry for any man who thinks too much about extending it, or who counts many consulships among his great boons. Think on this every day, so that you may depart life with an untroubled mind—life, which many clutch at and hold just like those who, swept away by a gush of water, clutch even at thorny plants and other rough things. Indeed most are tossed about wretchedly between their fear of death and the tortures of life; they don’t want to live, but don’t know how to die. Make your life joyful by putting aside all your anxiety about keeping it. No good thing benefits its possessor unless his mind is prepared to let go of it; and nothing is easier let go of than things which can’t be longed for once they are gone. Therefore fortify and harden yourself against the things that can befall even the most powerful. The fate of Pompey’s head was decided by a little boy and a eunuch; Crassus’s fate, by the cruel, proud Parthian; Caligula ordered Lepidus to bare his neck to the sword of a mere tribune, Dexter, and then offered his own to Chaerea.⁶ Fortune has advanced no one so far that her threats are not as great as her promises. Don’t trust in the present stretch of calm sailing; the sea is stirred up in a moment; ships sport on it, then are sunk, in the same day. Believe that both the thief and the foe can put a sword to your throat. There is no slave that does not hold the power of life and death over you, to say nothing of even

greater authorities. Take account of the examples of those destroyed by treachery in their own home, whether by open attack or secret plot, and you will understand that no fewer have fallen to the hatred of slaves than to that of kings. What matter then how high sits the man whom you fear, when that which you fear can be done by anyone at all? If by chance you are taken captive by an enemy squadron, your captor will order you to be led away—to the very place you were already going! Why do you deceive yourself and only now, for the first time, recognize what your condition has been for a long time? I put it thus: from the time you are born, you are being led to death. (*Epistle* 4.3–9)

I've heard, Lucilius (best of men), that Pompeii, that renowned Campanian city, has been leveled by an earthquake,⁷ and that some regions near it were shaken. This happened in wintertime—a time, our elders used to assure us, that is free from such dangers....

We must seek comforts for the fearful and take away their great terror. What can ever seem safe enough, if the very earth is violently shaken and its most stable segments start sliding around? If the one thing about it that seems permanent and fixed, so that it holds up everything that tends toward it, becomes mobile, if the ground loses its characteristic stability, then where will our fears find a place to settle? What refuge will our bodies escape to when anxious, if our fear springs from the inmost regions and is drawn up from the depths? ... What solace (never mind aid) can there be, when dread has lost any hope of escape? What, I ask, is fortified strongly enough, what is steady enough to protect someone else, or itself? I can repel an enemy with a wall; fortresses of towering height will stop even great armies with their impediments to entry; a harbor redeems us from the storm, and roofs ward off the cascading force of the clouds and rains that fall without end; a raging fire will not pursue those who flee it; underground shelters and caverns dug down into the depths give remedies for the attacks of thunderstorms and threats from the sky (for that sky-sent fire does not blast through solid earth but is blunted by even a small barrier of it); one can change one's abode during an outbreak of plague; no evil lacks a path of escape. Never have thunderbolts burned up whole peoples; plague has diminished cities but not blotted them out. But *this* evil spreads out far and wide as something inescapable, insatiable, destructive on a public scale. The ground swallows up not just homes and families and cities, but overwhelms entire nations and regions; at one moment it covers over their ruins, at the next it buries them in its deep abyss and leaves no remains by which that which no longer is can be seen to have once existed; bare ground stretches over the most exalted cities, with no

trace left of the fact that people once dwelled there.

There are some who are more afraid of this kind of death, because they go into the chasm homes and all, and, while living, are removed from the company of the living—as though every fate did not arrive at the very same end! Nature has this one particular point among other instances of its justice: when the time arrives to leave this world, we're all in the same condition.

There's no difference whether a single stone smashes me to bits, or I'm crushed by a whole mountain; whether the weight of a single house collapses on me and I'm killed by its small mass and the dust it raises, or the entire known world buries my head; whether I give up the ghost in broad daylight, or in a vast cavern of yawning landmasses; whether I am borne alone into that chasm, or a huge throng of nations falls with me; it doesn't matter to me how great a commotion attends my death. Death is the same everywhere.

Therefore let's gird up our courage against that disaster that can neither be evaded nor foreseen, and let's cease to listen to those who have quitted Campania and who have moved away in the wake of this event, and who say they will never come near that region again. Who can assure them that this ground, or that one, stands on any better foundations? All things share the same destiny; if they have not yet moved, they're still mobile. Perhaps this place where you now stand, "more safely," will be torn apart by this next night, or by the day that precedes the night. How do you know whether these places stand in a better condition—places in which Fortune has already used up its strength, places propped up henceforth only by their own ruin? We are wrong to think any part of the world is excused or immune from these perils; all regions are under the same law. Nature shaped nothing to be unmoved. Some things fall now, others at other times; just as in great cities, one house collapses now, another later, so on this globe ...

But what am I doing? I had promised a comfort for dangers that afflict us rarely, and here I am, warning of things to be feared on every side.... Imagine then that this sentence, spoken for those who were struck dumb by their sudden enslavement, as they stood between flames and enemies, was spoken to the whole human race: "The only salvation for the conquered is to hope for no salvation."⁸

If you want to fear nothing, believe that all things are to be feared. Look around you, see how small are the causes of our destruction: neither food, nor drink, nor waking, nor sleep helps keep us healthy, unless done in moderation. You'll soon understand that we are mere trifles and feeble little bodies, insubstantial, to be undone by no great effort. "No doubt this alone poses a danger to us—the trembling of the earth, its sudden breakup and engulfing of what stands above it!" The

man who fears lightnings, and the tremors and gapings of the earth, sets himself at great value. Would he be willing, if aware of his own frailty, to fear a gob of phlegm?⁹ “Clearly we were shaped thus from birth, got such well-framed limbs, grew up so tall and strong! And as a result, if the portions of the earth did not move, if the sky did not thunder, if the ground did not give way, we could not die!” The pain from a little fingernail—not even the whole nail, but a hangnail about to split off from its side—finishes us off! So should I fear earthquakes, when an excess of saliva can choke me? Should I dread waves roused from the sea’s depths, or worry that a flood tide, drawing up more water than usual, will sweep in, when a drink that goes down the wrong way has killed men off by suffocation? How foolish, to fear the sea, when you know that a droplet can destroy you!

There’s no greater comfort in the face of death than mortality itself; no greater comfort for all those external things that terrify us than the fact that numberless dangers lie within. What is more insane than to shrink from thunderbolts and to crawl underground in fear of lightning flashes? What is more foolish than to dread the trembling of the earth, or the sudden slides of the mountains, or the inundations of a sea that has been hurled past its shores, when death is at hand everywhere, popping up all around us, and nothing is so trivial as to lack sufficient force to ruin the whole human race? So there’s no reason *those* things should throw us into confusion, as if they held greater pain than ordinary death; indeed it’s just the reverse—since we must of necessity depart from life at some point and breathe our last, dying for some larger reason is a kind of joy. We must die, some time, some place; though the ground stand firm and stay within its own boundaries, not tossed about by any harmful force, still it will lie on top of me at some point. What matter if I thrust it on myself, or it thrusts itself on me? It’s cleft and smashed apart by the immense power of some unknown evil, and drags me down into its vast depths; so what? Is death more bearable on a level field? What do I have to complain of, if Nature does not want me to perish by an inglorious death, but heaves a part of itself onto me?

My friend Vagellius expresses it superbly in that famous poem of his: “If fall I must, then let me fall from heaven.” One could say in similar fashion: if fall I must, let me fall amid the smashing of the world, not because it’s right to wish for a national disaster, but because it’s a great comfort in the face of death to see that the earth too is mortal. (*Natural Questions* 6.1.1–2.9)

EPILOGUE: PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

Seneca greatly admired Socrates, who met death with equanimity, a scene dramatized by Plato in the dialogue Phaedo. In AD 65, Seneca too got an opportunity to put his philosophic ideas into practice, when Nero, his former student and friend, accused him of complicity in a coup attempt and demanded his death. As in the case of Socrates, followers of Seneca were on hand and later described the sage's last hour; their accounts have perished but were drawn on by Tacitus in the following passage of the historical chronicle, Annals. Seneca's suicide turned out to be complicated, and Tacitus's description of it is not so clearly affirmative as is Plato's account of the end of Socrates. Readers can judge for themselves whether Seneca achieved the kind of death he had contemplated and prepared for throughout his adult life.

[Nero] dispatched to Seneca a centurion, to announce the final necessity. Seneca, unafraid, asked for his will to be brought in; but the centurion forbade this, so he turned to his friends and said that, since he was barred from leaving them a reward suited to what they deserved, he would leave them a single but most beautiful thing, the template of his life, and that if they bore it in their memory, they would win the reputation of good morals as the reward of their friendship with him.... He embraced his wife, and softened a bit, in contrast to the fortitude he was then displaying; he asked and beseeched that she moderate her grief and not cling to it forever, but soothe her longing for her husband with honorable consolations, by thinking about the virtuous conduct of his life. She, however, insisted that death had been decreed for her as well, and demanded the blow of the executioner's hand. Seneca, not opposed to her having a share of glory, and also out of love—lest he abandon to injuries a woman who had been so singly devoted to him—said, "I've shown to you the delights of life, but you prefer the honor of death; I won't begrudge you your good example. Let the resolve of this brave exit be equal between us both, though let your death have a greater share of renown." After he'd said this, they opened their arms with the same stroke of the sword.

Seneca's body was old and reduced by his meager diet, and allowed his blood only a slow release, so he slashed the veins of his shins also and inside his knees. Exhausted by cruel sufferings, and fearing lest his pain break his wife's spirit or lest he himself lose his grip and become unable to bear the sight of her torments, he

persuaded her to remove herself into a separate room. Then, since his eloquence still held out as each moment passed, he dictated a number of things to the scribes who had been summoned....

As his death was continuing its long, slow course, Seneca asked of Statius Annaeus, a man who had proved himself a loyal friend and a skilled doctor, to produce the draught of poison he had prepared long before, the poison by which those condemned in Athenian state trials were executed.¹ It was brought and he drank it, but to no purpose, for his limbs were cold and his body was not receiving the force of the poison. Finally he entered a pool of hot water and, sprinkling the nearest of his slaves, he said that he was making the liquid a libation of thanks to Jupiter the Liberator.² Then, after he'd been dragged into a bath and suffocated by steam, he was cremated without any funeral ceremony. That was what he had instructed in his will, when, while still a very wealthy and powerful man, he had planned out his last rites. (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.61–64)

LATIN TEXTS

I. PREPARE YOURSELF

Epicurus ... ait 'meditare mortem,' vel si commodius sic transire ad nos hic potest sensus: 'egregia res est mortem condiscere.' [9] Supervacuum forsitan putas id discere quod semel utendum est. Hoc est ipsum quare meditari debeamus: semper discendum est quod an sciamus experiri non possumus. [10] 'Meditare mortem': qui hoc dicit meditari libertatem iubet. Qui mori didicit servire dedit; supra omnem potentiam est, certe extra omnem. Quid ad illum carcer et custodia et claustra? liberum ostium habet. Una est catena quae nos alligatos tenet, amor vitae, qui ut non est abiciendus, ita minuendus est, ut si quando res exiget, nihil nos detineat nec impediatur quominus parati simus quod quandoque faciendum est statim facere. (*Epistula* 26.8)

[7] Si in Parthia natus esset, arcum infans statim tenderet; si in Germania, protinus puer tenerum hastile vibraret; si avorum nostrorum temporibus fuisset, equitare et hostem comminus percutere didicisset. Haec singulis disciplina gentis suae suadet atque imperat. [8] Quid ergo huic meditandum est? quod adversus omnia tela, quod adversus omne hostium genus bene facit, mortem contemnere, quae quin habeat aliquid in se terribile, ut et animos nostros quos in amorem sui natura formavit offendat, nemo dubitat; nec enim opus esset in id comparari et acui in quod instinctu quodam voluntario iremus, sicut feruntur omnes ad conservationem sui. [9] Nemo discit ut si necesse fuerit aequo animo in rosa iaceat, sed in hoc duratur, ut tormentis non summittat fidem, ut si necesse fuerit stans etiam aliquando saucius pro vallo pervigilet et ne pilo quidem incumbat, quia solet obrepere interim somnus in aliquod adminiculum reclinatis.... [10] Quod si tanta cupiditas te longioris aevi tenet? cogita nihil eorum quae ab oculis abeunt et in rerum naturam, ex qua prodierunt ac mox processura sunt, reconduntur consumi: desinunt ista, non pereunt, et mors, quam pertimescimus ac recusamus, intermittit vitam, non eripit; veniet iterum qui nos in lucem reponat dies, quem multi recusarent nisi oblitos reduceret. [11] Sed postea diligentius docebo omnia quae videntur perire mutari. Aequo animo debet rediturus exire. Observa orbem rerum in se remeantium: videbis nihil in hoc mundo exstingui sed vicibus descendere ac surgere. Aestas abit, sed alter illam annus adducet; hiemps cecidit, referent illam sui menses; solem nox obruit, sed ipsam statim dies abiget. Stellarum iste discursus quidquid praeterit repetit; pars caeli levatur assidue, pars

mergitur.

[12] Denique finem faciam, si hoc unum adiecero, nec infantes [nec] pueros nec mente lapsos timere mortem et esse turpissimum si eam securitatem nobis ratio non praestat ad quam stultitia perducit. Vale. (*Epistula* 36)

Seneca Lucilio suo salutem. [1] Longum mihi commeatum dederat mala valetudo; repente me invasit. ‘Quo genere?’ inquis. Prorsus merito interrogas: adeo nullum mihi ignotum est. Uni tamen morbo quasi assignatus sum, quem quare Graeco nomine appellem nescio; satis enim apte dici suspirium potest. Brevis autem valde et procellae similis est impetus; intra horam fere desinit: quis enim diu exspirat? [2] Omnia corporis aut incommoda aut pericula per me transierunt: nullum mihi videtur molestius. Quidni? aliud enim quidquid est aegrotare est, hoc animam egerere. Itaque medici hanc ‘meditationem mortis’ vocant; facit enim aliquando spiritus ille quod saepe conatus est. Hilarem me putas haec tibi scribere quia effugi? [3] Tam ridicule facio, si hoc fine quasi bona valetudine delector, quam ille, quisquis vicisse se putat cum vadimonium distulit.

Ego vero et in ipsa suffocatione non desii cogitationibus laetis ac fortibus acquiescere. [4] ‘Quid hoc est?’ inquam ‘tam saepe mors experitur me? Faciat: [at] ego illam diu expertus sum.’ ‘Quando?’ inquis. Antequam nascerer. Mors est non esse. Id quale sit iam scio: hoc erit post me quod ante me fuit. Si quid in hac re tormenti est, necesse est et fuisse, antequam prodiremus in lucem; atqui nullam sensimus tunc vexationem. [5] Rogo, non stultissimum dicas si quis existimet lucernae peius esse cum exstincta est quam antequam accenditur? Nos quoque et exstinguimur et accendimur: medio illo tempore aliquid patimur, utrimque vero alta securitas est. In hoc enim, mi Lucili, nisi fallor, erramus, quod mortem iudicamus sequi, cum illa et praecesserit et secutura sit. Quidquid ante nos fuit mors est; quid enim refert non incipias an desinas, cum utriusque rei hic sit effectus, non esse?

[6] His et eiusmodi exhortationibus—tacitis scilicet, nam verbis locus non erat—alloqui me non desii; deinde paulatim suspirium illud, quod esse iam anhelitus coeperat, intervalla maiora fecit et retardatum est. At remansit, nec adhuc, quamvis desierit, ex natura fluit spiritus; sentio haesitationem quandam eius et moram.... [7] Hoc tibi de me recipe: non trepidabo ad extrema, iam praeparatus sum, nihil cogito de die toto. Illum tu lauda et imitare quem non piget mori, cum iuvet vivere: quae est enim virtus, cum eiciaris, exire? Tamen est et hic virtus: eicior quidem, sed tamquam exeam. Et ideo numquam eicitur sapiens quia eici est inde expelli unde invitus recedas: nihil invitus facit sapiens; necessitatem effugit, quia vult quod

coactura est. Vale. (*Epistula* 54)

Nihil tamen aequè tibi profuerit ad temperantiam omnium rerum
quam frequens cogitatio brevis aevi et huius incerti: quidquid facies,
respice ad mortem. Vale. (*Epistula* 114.27)

II. HAVE NO FEAR

Cogita nullis defunctum malis adfici, illa quae nobis inferos faciunt terribiles, fabulas esse, nullas imminere mortuis tenebras nec carcerem nec flumina igne flagrantia nec Oblivionem amnem nec tribunalia et reos et in illa libertate tam laxa ullos iterum tyrannos: luserunt ista poetae et vanis nos agitavere terroribus. [5] Mors dolorum omnium exsolutio est et finis ultra quem mala nostra non exeunt, quae nos in illam tranquillitatem in qua antequam nasceremur iacuimus reponit. Si mortuorum aliquis miseretur, et non natorum misereatur. (*Ad Marciam* 19.4)

Reverti unde veneris quid grave est? Male vivet quisquis nesciet bene mori. Huic itaque primum rei pretium detrahendum est et spiritus inter vilia numerandus. Gladiatores, ut ait Cicero, invisos habemus, si omni modo vitam impetrare cupiunt; favemus, si contemptum eius prae se ferunt. Idem evenire nobis scias; saepe enim causa moriendi est timide mori. [5] Fortuna illa, quae ludos sibi facit: ‘Quo,’ inquit, ‘te reservem, malum et trepidum animal? Eo magis convulneraberis et confodieris, quia nescis praebere iugulum. At tu et vives diutius et morieris expeditius, qui ferrum non subducta cervice nec manibus oppositis sed animose recipis.’ [6] Qui mortem timebit, nihil umquam pro homine vivo faciet. At qui sciet hoc sibi cum conciperetur statim conductum, vivet ad formulam et simul illud quoque eodem animi robore praestabit, ne quid ex iis, quae eveniunt, subitum sit. (*De Tranquillitate Animi* 11.4)

Canus Iulius, vir imprimis magnus, cuius admirationi ne hoc quidem obstat, quod nostro saeculo natus est, eum Gaio diu altercatus, postquam abeunti Phalaris ille dixit: ‘Ne forte inepta spe tibi blandiaris, duci te iussi.’ ‘Gratias,’ inquit, ‘ago, optime princeps.’ [5] Quid senserit dubito, multa enim mihi occurrunt. Contumeliosus esse voluit et ostendere, quanta crudelitas esset, in qua mors beneficium erat? An exprobravit illi cotidianam dementiam? (agebant enim gratias et quorum liberi occisi et quorum bona ablata erant) an tamquam libertatem libenter accepit? Quicquid est, magno animo respondit.... [7] Ludebat latrunculis, cum centurio agmen periturorum trahens illum quoque excitari iuberet. Vocatus numeravit calculos et sodali suo: ‘Vide,’ inquit, ‘ne post mortem meam mentiaris te vicisse’; tum annuens centurioni: ‘Testis,’ inquit, ‘eris uno me antecedere.’ (*De Tranquillitate Animi* 14.4)

Seneca Lucilio suo salute. [1] Bassum Aufidium, virum optimum, vidi quassum, aetati obluctantem. Sed iam plus illum degravat quam quod possit attolli; magno senectus et universo pondere incubuit. Scis illum semper infirmi corporis et exsucti fuisse; diu illud continuit et, ut verius dicam, concinnavit: subito defecit. Quemadmodum in nave quae sentinam trahit uni rimae aut alteri obsistitur, ubi plurimis locis laxari coepit et cedere, succurri non potest navigio dehiscenti, ita in senili corpore aliquatenus imbecillitas sustineri et fulciri potest. Ubi tamquam in putri aedificio omnis iunctura diducitur, et dum alia excipitur, alia discinditur, circumspiciendum est quomodo exeas. Bassus tamen noster alacer animo est: hoc philosophia praestat, in conspectu mortis hilarem <esse> et in quocumque corporis habitu fortem laetumque nec deficientem quamvis deficiatur. Magnus gubernator et scisso navigat velo et, si exarmavit, tamen reliquias navigii aptat ad cursum. Hoc facit Bassus noster et eo animo vultuque finem suum spectat quo alienum spectare nimis securi putares. Magna res est, Lucili, haec et diu discenda, cum adventat hora illa inevitabilis, aequo animo abire. Alia genera mortis spei mita sunt: desinit morbus, incendium exstinguitur, ruina quos videbatur oppressura deposuit; mare quos hauserat eadem vi qua sorbebat eiecit incolumes; gladium miles ab ipsa perituri cervice re vocavit: nil habet quod speret quem senectus ducit ad mortem; huic uni intercedi non potest. Nullo genere homines mollius moriuntur sed nec diutius. [5] Bassus noster videbatur mihi prosequi se et componere et vivere tamquam superstes sibi et sapienter ferre desiderium sui. Nam de morte multa loquitur et id agit sedulo ut nobis persuadeat, si quid incommodi aut metus in hoc negotio est, morientis vitium esse, non mortis; non magis in ipsa quicquam esse molestiae quam post ipsam. [6] Tam demens autem est qui timet quod non est passurus quam qui timet quod non est sensurus. An quis quam hoc futurum credit, ut per quam nihil sentiatur, ea sentiatur? 'Ergo' inquit 'mors adeo extra omne malum est ut sit extra omnem malorum metum.' [7] Haec ego scio et saepe dicta et saepe dicenda, sed neque cum legerem aequae mihi profuerunt neque cum audirem iis dicentibus qui negabant timenda a quorum metu aberant: hic vero plurimum apud me auctoritatis habuit, cum loqueretur de morte vicina. [8] Dicam enim quid sentiam: puto fortiores esse eum qui in ipsa morte est quam qui circa mortem. Mors enim admota etiam imperitis animum dedit non vitandi inevitabilia; si gladiator tota pugna timidissimus iugulum adversario praestat et errantem gladium sibi attemperat. At illa quae in propinquo est utique ventura desiderat lentam animi firmitatem, quae est rarior nec potest nisi a sapiente praestari. [9] Libentissime itaque illum audiebam quasi ferentem de morte: sententiam et qualis esset eius natura velut propius inspectae indicantem. Plus, ut puto, fidei haberet apud te, plus

ponderis, si quis revixisset et in morte nihil mali esse narraret expertus: accessus mortis quam perturbationem afferat optime tibi hi dicent qui secundum illam steterunt, qui venientem et viderunt et receperunt. [10] Inter hos Bassum licet numeres, qui nos decipi noluit. Is ait tam stultum esse qui mortem timeat quam qui senectutem; nam quemadmodum senectus adulescentiam sequitur, ita mors senectutem. Vivere noluit qui mori non vult; vita enim cum exceptione mortis data est; ad hanc itur. Quam ideo timere dementis est quia certa exspectantur, dubia metuuntur. [11] Mors necessitatem habet aequam et invictam: quis queri potest in ea condicione se esse in qua nemo non est? prima autem pars est aequitatis aequalitas. Sed nunc supervacuum est naturae causam agere, quae non aliam voluit legem nostram esse quam suam: quid quid composuit resolvit, et quid-quid resolvit componit iterum. [12] Iam vero si cui contigit ut illum senectus leviter emitteret, non repente avulsum vitae sed minutatim subductum, o ne ille agere gratias diis omnibus debet quod satius ad requiem homini necessariam, lasso gratam perductus est. Vides quosdam optantes mortem, et quidem magis quam rogari solet vita. Nescio utros existimem maiorem nobis animum dare, qui deposcunt mortem an qui hilares eam quietique opperiuntur, quoniam illud ex rabie interdum ac repentina indignatione fit, haec ex iudicio certo tranquillitas est. Venit aliquis ad mortem iratus: mortem venientem nemo hilaris excepit nisi qui se ad illam diu composuerat.

[13] Fateor ergo ad hominem mihi carum ex pluribus me causis frequentius venisse, ut scirem an illum totiens eundem invenirem, numquid cum corporis viribus minueretur animi vigor; qui sic crescebat illi quomodo manifestior notari solet agitatorum laetitia cum septimo spatio palmae appropinquat. [14] Dicebat quidem ille Epicuri praeceptis obsequens, primum sperare se nullum dolorem esse in illo extremo anhelitu; si tamen esset, habere aliquantum in ipsa brevitate solacii; nullum enim dolorem longum esse qui magnus est. Ceterum succursurum sibi etiam in ipsa distractione animae corporis quae, si cum cruciatu id fieret, post illum dolorem se dolere non posse. Non dubitare autem se quin senilis anima in primis labris esset nec magna vi distraheretur a corpore. 'Ignis qui alentem materiam occupavit aqua et interdum ruina extinguendus est: ille qui alimentis deficitur sua sponte subsidit.' [15] Libenter haec, mi Lucili, audio non tamquam nova, sed tamquam in rem praesentem perductus. Quid ergo? non multos spectavi abruptantes vitam? Ego vero vidi, sed plus momenti apud me habent qui ad mortem veniunt sine odio vitae et admittunt illam, non attrahunt. [16] Illud quidem aiebat tormentum nostra nos sentire opera, quod tunc trepidamus cum prope a nobis esse credimus mortem: a quo enim non prope est, parata omnibus locis omnibusque momentis? 'Sed consideremus' inquit 'tunc cum aliqua causa moriendi

videtur accedere, quanto aliae propiores sint quae non timentur.’ [17] Hostis alicui mortem minabatur, hanc cruditas occupavit. Si distinguere voluerimus causas metus nostri, inveniemus alias esse, alias videri. Non mortem timemus sed cogitationem mortis; ab ipsa enim semper tantundem absumus. Ita si timenda mors est, semper timenda est: quod enim morti tempus exemptum est?

[18] Sed vereri debeo ne tam longas epistulas peius quam mortem oderis. Itaque finem faciam: tu tamen mortem ut numquam timeas semper cogita. Vale. (*Epistula* 30)

[10] mors non est gloriosa, sed fortiter mori gloriosum est.... [11] nemo mortem laudat, sed eum cuius mors ante abstulit animum quam conturbavit. [12] ... mors enim illa quae in Catone gloriosa est in Bruto statim turpis est et erubescenda. Hic est enim Brutus qui, cum periturus mortis moras quaereret, ad exonerandum ventrem secessit et evocatus ad mortem iussusque praebere cervicem, ‘praebebo,’ inquit ‘ita vivam.’ Quae dementia est fugere cum retro ire non possis! ‘Praebebo,’ inquit ‘ita vivam.’ Paene adiecit ‘vel sub Antonio.’ O hominem dignum qui vitae dederetur!

[13] Sed, ut coeperam dicere, vides ipsam mortem nec malum esse nec bonum: Cato illa honestissime usus est, turpissime Brutus. Omnis res quod non habuit decus virtute addita sumit.... Massa per se nec calida nec frigida est: in fornacem coniecta concaluit, in aquam demissa refrixit. Mors honesta est per illud quod honestum est, id <est> virtus et animus externa contemnens.

[15] Est et horum, Lucili, quae appellamus media grande discrimen. Non enim sic mors indifferens est quomodo utrum capillos pares <an inpaes> habeas: mors inter illa est quae mala quidem non sunt, tamen habent mali speciem: sui amor est et permanendi conservandique se insita voluntas atque aspernatio dissolutionis, quia videtur multa nobis bona eripere et nos ex hac cui adsuevimus rerum copia educere. Illa quoque res morti nos alienat, quod haec iam novimus, illa ad quae transitori sumus nescimus qualia sint, et horremus ignota. Naturalis praeterea tenebrarum metus est, in quas adductura mors creditur. [16] Itaque etiam si indifferens mors est, non tamen ea est quae facile neglegi possit: magna exercitatione durandus est animus ut conspectum eius accessumque patiat. Mors contemni debet magis quam solet; multa enim de illa credidimus; multorum ingeniis certatum est ad augendam eius infamiam; descriptus est carcer infernus et perpetua nocte oppressa regio, in qua

ingens ianitor Orci
ossa super recubans antro semesa cruento
aeternum latrans exsanguis terreat
umbras.

Etiam cum persuaseris istas fabulas esse nec quicquam defunctis superesse quod timeant, subit alius metus: aequae enim timent ne apud inferos sint quam ne nusquam. [17] His adversantibus quae nobis offundit longa persuasio, fortiter pati mortem quidni gloriosum sit et inter maxima opera mentis humanae? Quae numquam ad virtutem exsurget si mortem malum esse crediderit: exsurget si putabit indifferens esse. (*Epistula* 82)

Et doleas oportet et sitias et esurias et senescas (si tibi longior contigerit inter homines mora) et aegrotas et perdas aliquid et pereas. [19] Non est tamen quod istis qui te circumstrepunt credas: nihil horum malum est, nihil intolerabile aut durum. Ex consensu istis metus est. Sic mortem times quomodo famam: quid autem stultius homine verba metuente? Eleganter Demetrius noster solet dicere eodem loco sibi esse voces inperitorum quo ventre redditos crepitus. 'Quid enim' inquit 'mea, susum isti an deosum sonent?' [20] Quanta dementia est vereri ne infameris ab infamibus! Quemadmodum famam extimuiisti sine causa, sic et illa quae numquam timeres nisi fama iussisset. Num quid detrimenti faceret vir bonus iniquis rumoribus sparsus? [21] Ne morti quidem hoc apud nos noceat: et haec malam opinionem habet. Nemo eorum qui illam accusat expertus est: interim temeritas est damnare quod nescias. At illud scis, quam multis utilis sit, quam multos liberet tormentis, egestate, querellis, supplicis, taedio. Non sumus in ullius potestate, cum mors in nostra potestate sit. (*Epistula* 91.18)

[33] Cum se in hanc sublimitatem tulit, corporis quoque ut oneris necessarii non amator sed procurator est, nec se illi cui inpositus est subicit. Nemo liber est qui corpori servit; nam ut alios dominos quos nimia pro illo sollicitudo invenit transeas, ipsius morosum imperium delicatumque est. [34] Ab hoc modo aequo animo exit, modo magno prosilit, nec quis deinde relictus eius futurus sit exitus quaerit; sed ut ex barba capilloque tonsa neglegimus, ita ille divinus animus egressurus hominem, quo receptaculum suum conferatur, ignis illud <exurat> an terra contegat an ferae distrahant, non magis ad se iudicat pertinere quam secundas ad editum infantem. (*Epistula* 92)

III. HAVE NO REGRETS

‘Nimis tamen cito perit et immaturus.’ Primum puta illi superfuisse—Comprende quantum plurimum procedere homini licet: quantum est? Ad breuissimum tempus editi, cito cessuri loco venienti.... De nostris aetatibus loquor, quas <scimus> incredibili celeritate convolvi? Computa urbium saecula: videbis quam non diu steterint etiam quae vetustate gloriantur. Omnia humana brevia et caduca sunt et infiniti temporis nullam partem occupantia. [2] Terram hanc cum urbibus populisque et fluminibus et ambitu maris puncti loco ponimus ad uniuersa referentes: minorem portionem aetas nostra quam puncti habet, si omni tempori comparetur, cuius maior est mensura quam mundi, utpote cum ille se intra huius spatium totiens remetiatur. Quid ergo interest id extendere cuius quantumcumque fuerit incrementum non multum aberit a nihilo? Uno modo multum est quod vivimus, si satis est. [3] Licet mihi vivaces et in memoriam traditae senectutis uiros nomines, centenos denosque percenseas annos: cum ad omne tempus dimiseris animum, nulla erit illa breuissimi longissimique aevi differentia, si inspecto quanto quis vixerit spatio comparaveris quanto non vixerit. (*Ad Marciam* 21)

[1] Desinamus quod voluimus velle. Ego certe id ago <ne> senex eadem velim quae puer volui. In hoc unum eunt dies, in hoc noctes, hoc opus meum est, haec cogitatio, imponere veteribus malis finem. Id ago ut mihi instar totius vitae dies sit; nec mehercules tamquam ultimum rapio, sed sic illum aspicio tamquam esse vel ultimus possit. [2] Hoc animo tibi hanc epistulam scribo, tamquam me cum maxime scribentem mors evocatura sit; paratus exire sum, et ideo fruar vita quia quam diu futurum hoc sit non nimis pendeo. Ante senectutem curavi ut bene viverem, in senectute ut bene moriar; bene autem mori est libenter mori. [3] ... Itaque sic animum componamus ut quid-quid res exigit, id velimus, et in primis ut finem nostri sine tristitia cogitemus. [4] Ante ad mortem quam ad vitam praeparandi sumus. Satis instructa vita est, sed nos in instrumenta eius avidi sumus; deesse aliquid nobis videtur et semper videbitur: ut satis vixerimus, nec anni nec dies faciunt sed animus. Vixi, Lucili carissime, quantum satis erat; mortem plenus exspecto. Vale. (*Epistula* 61)

[5] Tullius Marcellinus, quem optime noveras, adulescens quietus et cito senex, morbo et non insanabili correptus sed longo et molesto et multa imperante, coepit deliberare de morte. Convocavit complures

amicos. Unusquisque aut, quia timidus erat, id illi suadebat quod sibi suasisset, aut, quia adulator et blandus, id consilium dabat quod deliberanti gratius fore suspicabatur. [6] Amicus noster Stoicus, homo egregius et, ut verbis illum quibus laudari dignus est laudem, vir fortis ac strenuus, videtur mihi optime illum cohortatus. Sic enim coepit: 'noli, mi Marcelline, torqueri tamquam de re magna deliberes. Non est res magna vivere: omnes servi tui vivunt, omnia animalia: magnum est honeste mori, prudenter, fortiter. Cogita quamdiu iam idem facias: cibus, somnus, libido—per hunc circulum curritur; mori velle non tantum prudens aut fortis aut miser, etiam fastidiosus potest.' [7] Non opus erat suasore illi sed adiutore: servi parere nolebant. Primum detraxit illis metum et indicavit tunc familiam periculum adire cum incertum esset an mors domini voluntaria fuisset; alioqui tam mali exempli esse occidere dominum quam prohibere. [8] Deinde ipsum Marcellinum admonuit non esse inhumanum, quemadmodum cena peracta reliquiae circumstantibus dividantur, sic peracta vita aliquid porrigi iis qui totius vitae ministri fuissent. Erat Marcellinus facilis animi et liberalis etiam cum de suo fieret; minutas itaque summulas distribuit flentibus servis et illos ultro consolatus est. [9] Non fuit illi opus ferro, non sanguine: triduo abstinuit et in ipso cubiculo poni tabernaculum iussit. Solium deinde inlatum est, in quo diu iacuit et calda subinde suffusa paulatim defecit, ut aiebat, non sine quadam voluptate, quam adferre solet lenis dissolutio non inexpertis nobis, quos aliquando liquit animus.

[10] In fabellam excessi non ingrati tibi; exitum enim amici tui cognosces non difficilem nec miserum. Quamvis enim mortem sibi consciverit, tamen mollissime excessit et vita elapsus est. Sed ne inutilis quidem haec fabella fuerit; saepe enim talia exempla necessitas exigit. Saepe debemus mori nec volumus, morimur nec volumus. [11] Nemo tam inperitus est ut nesciat quandoque moriendum; tamen cum prope accessit, tergiversatur, tremit, plorat. Nonne tibi videtur stultissimus omnium qui flevit quod ante annos mille non vixerat? aequae stultus est qui flet quod post annos mille non vivet. Haec paria sunt: non eris nec fuisti; utrumque tempus alienum est. [12] In hoc punctum coniectus es, quod ut extendas, quousque extendes? Quid fles? quid optas? perdis operam.

Desine fata deum flecti sperare precando.

Rata et fixa sunt et magna atque aeterna necessitate ducuntur: eo ibis quo omnia eunt. Quid tibi novi est? Ad hanc legem natus es; hoc patri tuo accidit, hoc matri, hoc maioribus, hoc omnibus ante te, hoc omnibus post te. Series invicta et nulla mutabilis ope inligavit ac trahit cuncta. [13] Quantus te populus moriturosum sequetur, quantus comitabitur! Fortior, ut opinor, esses, si multa milia tibi

commorerentur; atqui multa milia et hominum et animalium hoc ipso momento quo tu mori dubitas animam variis generibus emittunt. Tu autem non putabas te aliquando ad id perventurum ad quod semper ibas? Nullum sine exitu iter est.

[14] Exempla nunc magnorum virorum me tibi iudicas relaturum? puerorum referam. Lacon ille memoriae traditur, inpubis adhuc, qui captus clamabat 'non serviam' sua illa Dorica lingua, et verbis fidem inposuit: ut primum iussus est fungi servili et contumelioso ministerio (adferre enim vas obscenum iubebatur), inlisum parieti caput rupit.

[15] Tam prope libertas est: et servit aliquis? Ita non sic perire filium tuum malles quam per inertiam senem fieri? Quid ergo est cur perturberis, si mori fortiter etiam puerile est? Puta nolle te sequi: duceris. Fac tui iuris quod alieni est. Non sumes pueri spiritum, ut dicas 'non servio'? Infelix, servis hominibus, servis rebus, servis vitae; nam vita, si moriendi virtus abest, servitus est. [16] Ecquid habes propter quod expectes? voluptates ipsas quae te morantur ac retinent consumpsisti: nulla tibi nova est, nulla non iam odiosa ipsa satietate.

Quis sit vini, quis mulsi sapor scis: nihil interest centum per vesicam tuam an mille amphorae transeant: saccus es. Quid sapiat ostreum, quid nullus optime nosti: nihil tibi luxuria tua in futuros annos intactum reservavit. Atqui haec sunt a quibus invitus divelleris. [17] Quid est aliud quod tibi eripi doleas? Amicos? Scis enim amicus esse? Patriam? tanti enim illam putas ut tardius cenes? Solem? quem, si posses, extingueres: quid enim umquam fecisti luce dignum? Confitere non curiae te, non fori, non ipsius rerum naturae desiderio tardiozem ad moriendum fieri: invitus relinquis macellum, in quo nihil reliquisti.

[18] Mortem times: at quomodo illam media boletatione contemnaris! Vivere vis: scis enim? Mori times: quid porro? ista vita non mors est?

C. Caesar, cum illum transeuntem per Latinam viam unus ex custodiarum agmine demissa usque in pectus vetere barba rogaret mortem, 'nunc enim' inquit 'vivis?' Hoc istis respondendum est quibus succursura mors est: 'mori times: nunc enim vivis?' [19] 'Sed ego' inquit 'vivere volo, qui multa honeste facio; invitus relinquo officia vitae, quibus fideliter et industrie fungor.'

Quid? tu nescis unum esse ex vitae officiis et mori? Nullum officium relinquis; non enim certus numerus quem debeas explere finitur. [20] Nulla vita est non brevis; nam si ad naturam rerum respexeris, etiam Nestoris et Sattiae brevis est, quae inscribi monumento suo iussit annis se nonaginta novem vixisse. Vides aliquem gloriari senectute longa: quis illam ferre potuisset si contigisset centesimum implere? Quomodo fabula, sic vita: non quam diu, sed quam bene acta sit, refert. Nihil ad rem pertinet quo loco desinas. Quocumque voles desine: tantum bonam clausulam inpone. Vale. (*Epistula 77*)

Seneca Lucilio suo salutem. [1] In epistula qua de morte Metronactis philosophi querebaris, tamquam et potuisset diutius vivere et debuisset, aequitatem tuam desideravi, quae tibi in omni persona, in omni negotio superest, in una re deest, in qua omnibus: multos inveni aequos adversus homines, adversus deos neminem. Obiurgamus cotidie fatum: 'quare ille in medio cursu raptus est? quare ille non rapitur? quare senectutem et sibi et aliis gravem extendit?' [2] Utrum, obsecro te, aequius iudicas, te naturae an tibi parere naturam? quid autem interest quam cito exeas unde utique exeundum est? Non ut diu vivamus curandum est, sed ut satis; nam ut diu vivas fato opus est, ut satis, animo. Longa est vita si plena est; impletur autem cum animus sibi bonum suum reddidit et ad se potestatem sui transtulit. [3] Quid illum octoginta anni iuvant per inertiam exacti? non vixit iste sed in vita moratus est, nec sero mortuus est, sed diu. 'Octoginta annis vixit.' Interest mortem eius ex quo die numeres. 'At ille obiit viridis.' [4] Sed officia boni civis, boni amici, boni filii executus est; in nulla parte cessavit; licet aetas eius imperfecta sit, vita perfecta est. 'Octoginta annis vixit.' Immo octoginta annis fuit, nisi forte sic vixisse eum dicis quomodo dicuntur arbores vivere....

[6] Nec ideo mihi plures annos accedere recusaverim; nihil tamen mihi ad beatam vitam defuisse dicam si spatium eius inciditur; non enim ad eum diem me aptavi quem ultimum mihi spes avida promiserat, sed nullum non tamquam ultimum aspexi.... [7] Quemadmodum in minore corporis habitu potest homo esse perfectus, sic et in minore temporis modo potest vita esse perfecta. Aetas inter externa est. Quamdiu sim alienum est: quamdiu vero ut sim, meum est. Hoc a me exige, ne velut per tenebras aevum ignobile emetiar, ut agam vitam, non ut praetervehar. [8] Quaeris quod sit amplissimum vitae spatium? usque ad sapientiam vivere; qui ad illam pervenit attingit non longissimum finem, sed maximum. Ille vero gloriatur audacter et dis agat gratias interque eos sibi, et rerum naturae inputet quod fuit. Merito enim inputabit: meliorem illi vitam reddidit quam accepit. Exemplar boni viri posuit, qualis quantusque esset ostendit; si quid adiecisset, fuisset simile praeterito. [9] Et tamen quousque vivimus? Omnium rerum cognitione frui sumus: scimus a quibus principiis natura se attollat, quemadmodum ordinet mundum, per quas annum vices revocet, quemadmodum omnia quae usquam erunt cluserit et se ipsam finem sui fecerit; scimus sidera impetu suo vadere, praeter terram nihil stare, cetera continua velocitate decurrere; scimus quemadmodum solem luna praetereat, quare tardior velociorem post se relinquat, quomodo lumen accipiat aut perdat, quae causa inducat noctem, quae reducat diem: illuc eundum est ubi ista propius aspicias. [10] 'Nec hac spe' inquit sapiens ille 'fortius exeo, quod patere mihi ad deos meos iter iudico. Merui quidem admitti et iam inter illos fui

animumque illo meum misi et ad me illi suum miserant. Sed tolli me de medio puta et post mortem nihil ex homine restare: aequae magnum animum habeo, etiam si nusquam transiturus excedo.' ... [12] Numquid feliciorum iudicas eum qui summo die muneris quam eum qui medio occiditur? numquid aliquem tam stulte cupidum esse vitae putas ut iugulari in spoliario quam in harena malit? Non maiore spatio alter alterum praecedimus. Mors per omnis it; qui occidit consequitur occisum. Minimum est de quo sollicitissime agitur. Quid autem ad rem pertinet quam diu vites quod evitare non possis? Vale. (*Epistula* 93)

Seneca Lucilio suo salutem. [1] Omnis dies, omnis hora quam nihil simus ostendit et aliquo argumento recenti admonet fragilitatis oblitus; tum aeterna meditato respicere cogit ad mortem. Quid sibi istud principium velit quaeris? Senecionem Cornelium, equitem Romanum splendidum et officiosum, noveras: ex tenui principio seipse promoverat et iam illi declivis erat cursus ad cetera; facilius enim crescit dignitas quam incipit. [2] Pecunia quoque circa paupertatem plurimum morae habet; dum ex illa erepat haeret. Iam Senecio divitis imminebat, ad quas illum duae res ducebant efficacissimae, et quaerendi et custodiendi scientia, quarum vel altera locupletem facere potuisset. [3] Hic homo summae frugalitatis, non minus patrimonii quam corporis diligens, cum me ex consuetudine mane vidisset, cum per totum diem amico graviter adfecto et sine spe iacentiusque in noctem adsedisset, cum hilaris cenasset, genere valetudinis praecipiti arreptus, angina, vix compressum artatis faucibus spiritum traxit in lucem. Intra paucissimas ergo horas quam omnibus erat sani ac valentis officiis functus decessit. [4] Ille qui et mari et terra pecuniam agitabat, qui ad publica quoque nullum relinquens inexpertum genus quaestus accesserat, in ipso actu bene cedentium rerum, in ipso procurrentis pecuniae impetu raptus est.

Insere nunc, Meliboeae, piros, pone [in] ordine vites.

Quam stultum est aetatem disponere ne crastini quidem dominum! o quanta dementia est spes longas inchoantium: emam, aedificabo, credam, exigam, honores geram, tum deinde lassam et plenam senectutem in otium referam. [5] Omnia, mihi crede, etiam felicibus dubia sunt; nihil sibi quisquam de futuro debet promittere; id quoque quod tenetur per manus exit et ipsam quam premimus horam casus incidit. Volvitur tempus rata quidem lege, sed per obscurum: quid autem ad me an naturae certum sit quod mihi incertum est? [6] Navigationes longas et pererratis litoribus alienis seros in patriam reditus proponimus, militiam et castrensium laborum tarda manipretia, procurationes officiorumque per officia processus, cum

interim ad latus mors est, quae quoniam numquam cogitatur nisi aliena, sub e nobis ingeruntur mortalitatis exempla non diutius quam dum miramur haesura. [7] Quid autem stultius quam mirari id ullo die factum quod omni potest fieri? Stat quidem terminus nobis ubi illum inexorabilis fatorum necessitas fixit, sed nemo scit nostrum quam prope versetur a termino; sic itaque formemus animum tamquam ad extrema ventum sit.... [10] Ideo propera, Lucili mi, vivere, et singulos dies singulas vitas puta. Qui hoc modo se aptavit, cui vita sua cotidie fuit tota, securus est: in spem viventibus proximum quodque tempus elabitur, subitque aviditas et miserrimus ac miserrima omnia efficiens metus mortis. Inde illud Maecenatis turpissimum votum quo et debilitatem non recusat et deformitatem et novissime acutam crucem, dummodo inter haec mala spiritus prorogetur:

[11] debilem facito manu,
debilem pede coxo,
tuber adstrue gibberum,
lubricos quate dentes:
vita dum superest, benest;
hanc mihi, vel acuta
si sedeam cruce, sustine.

[12] Quod miserrimum erat si incidisset optatur, et tamquam vita petitur supplicii mora.... Huic putes umquam recitasse Vergilium:

usque adeone mori miserum est?

Optat ultima malorum et quae pati gravissimum est extendi ac sustineri cupit: qua mercede? scilicet vitae longioris. Quod autem vivere est diu mori? [14] Invenitur aliquis qui velit inter supplicia tabescere et perire membratim et totiens per stilicidia emittere animam quam semel exhalare? Invenitur qui velit adactus ad illud infelix lignum, iam debilis, iam pravus et in foedum scapularum ac pectoris tuber elisus, cui multae moriendi causae etiam citra crucem fuerant, trahere animam tot tormenta tracturam? Nega nunc magnum beneficium esse naturae quod necesse est mori. [15] Multi peiora adhuc pacisci parati sunt: etiam amicum prodere, ut diutius vivant, et liberos ad stuprum manu sua tradere, ut contingat lucem videre tot consciam scelerum. Excutienda vitae cupido est discendumque nihil interesse quando patiaris quod quandoque patiendum est; quam bene vivas referre, non quamdiu; saepe autem in hoc esse bene, ne diu. Vale. (*Epistula* 101)

IV. SET YOURSELF FREE

O ignaros malorum suorum, quibus non mors ut optimum inuentum naturae laudatur expectaturque, siue felicitatem includit, siue calamitatem repellit, siue satietatem ac lassitudinem senis terminat, siue iuvenile aevum dum meliora sperantur in flore deducit, siue pueritiam ante duriores gradus revocat, omnibus finis, multis remedium, quibusdam votum, de nullis melius merita quam de iis ad quos uenit antequam invocaretur. [2] Haec seruitutem invito domino remittit; haec captivorum catenas levat; haec e carcere educit quos exire imperium inpotens vetuerat; haec exulibus in patriam semper animum oculosque tendentibus ostendit nihil interesse infra quos quis iaceat; haec, ubi res communes fortuna male diuisit et aequo iure genitos alium alii donavit, exaequat omnia; haec est post quam nihil quisquam alieno fecit arbitrio; haec est in qua nemo humilitatem suam sensit; haec est quae nulli non patuit; haec est, Marcia, quam pater tuus concupit; haec est, inquam, quae efficit ut nasci non sit supplicium, quae efficit ut non concidam aduersus minas casuum, ut servare animum saluum ac potentem sui possim: habeo quod appellem. [3] Video istic cruces ne unius quidem generis sed aliter ab aliis fabricatas: capite quidam conversos in terram suspendere, alii per obscena stipitem egerunt, alii brachia patibulo explicuerunt; video fidiculas, video verbera, et ~membris singulis articulis~ singula ~docuerunt machinamenta: sed video et mortem. Sunt istic hostes cruenti, ciues superbi: sed video istic et mortem. Non est molestum servire ubi, si domini pertaesum est, licet uno gradu ad libertatem transire. Caram te, uita, beneficio mortis habeo. (*Ad Marciam* 20.1)

Non adhortabimur ferre imperia carnificum; ostendemus in omni servitute apertam libertati viam. Si aeger animus et suo vitio miser est, huic miseras finire secum licet. [4] Dicam et illi, qui in regem incidit sagittis pectora amicorum petentem, et illi, cuius dominus liberorum visceribus patres saturat: 'Quid gemis, demens? Quid expectas, ut te aut hostis aliquis per exitium gentis tuae vindicet aut rex a longinquo potens advolet? Quocumque respexeris, ibi malorum finis est. Vides illum praecipitem locum? Illac ad libertatem descenditur. Vides illud mare, illud flumen, illum puteum? Libertas illic in imo sedet. Vides illam arborem brevem, retorridam, infelicem? Pendet inde libertas. Vides iugulum tuum, guttur tuum, cor tuum? Effugia servitutis sunt. Nimis tibi operosos exitus monstro et multum animi ac roboris exigentes? Quaeris quod sit ad libertatem iter? Quaelibet in corpore

tuo vena!’ (*De Ira* 3.15.3)

Non uideo, inquam, quid habeat in terris Iuppiter pulchrius, si <eo> convertere animum velit, quam ut spectet Catonem iam partibus non semel fractis stantem nihilo minus inter ruinas publicas rectum. [10] ‘Licet’ inquit ‘omnia in unius dicionem concesserint, custodiantur legionibus terrae, classibus maria, Caesarianus portas miles obsideat, Cato qua exeat habet: una manu latam libertati viam faciet. Ferrum istud, etiam civili bello purum et innoxium, bonas tandem ac nobiles edet operas: libertatem quam patriae non potuit Catoni dabit. Aggredere, anime, diu meditatatum opus, eripe te rebus humanis. Iam Petreius et Iuba concucurrerunt iacentque alter alterius manu caesi, fortis et egregia fati conventio, sed quae non deceat magnitudinem nostram: tam turpe est Catoni mortem ab ullo petere quam uitam.’ [11] Liquet mihi cum magno spectasse gaudio deos, dum ille vir, acerrimus sui vindex, alienae saluti consulit et instruit discedentium fugam, dum studia etiam nocte ultima tractat, dum gladium sacro pectori infigit, dum viscera spargit et illam sanctissimam animam indignamque quae ferro contaminaretur manu educit. [12] Inde crediderim fuisse parum certum et efficax vulnus: non fuit dis immortalibus satis spectare Catonem semel; retenta ac revocata uirtus est ut in difficiliore parte se ostenderet; non enim tam magno animo mors initur quam repetitur. Quidni libenter spectarent alumnum suum tam claro ac memorabili exitu evadentem? mors illos consecrat quorum exitum et qui timent laudant. (*De Providentia* 2.9)

‘Ante omnia cavi ne quis vos teneret invitos; patet exitus: si pugnare non vultis, licet fugere. Ideo ex omnibus rebus quas esse vobis necessarias volui nihil feci facilius quam mori. Prono animam loco posui: <si> trahitur, adtendite modo et uidebitis quam brevis ad libertatem et quam expedita ducat via. Non tam longas in exitu vobis quam intransitibus moras posui; alioqui magnum in vos regnum fortuna tenuisset, si homo tam tarde moreretur quam nascitur. [8] Omne tempus, omnis vos locus doceat quam facile sit renuntiare naturae et munus illi suum inpingere; inter ipsa altaria et sollemnes sacrificantium ritus, dum optatur vita, mortem condiscite. Corpora opima taurorum exiguo concidunt vulnere et magnarum virium animalia humanae manus ictus inpellit; tenui ferro commissura cervicis abrumpitur, et cum articulus ille qui caput collumque committit incisus est, tanta illa moles corrui. [9] Non in alto latet spiritus nec utique ferro eruendus est; non sunt vulnere penitus inpresso scrutanda praecordia: in proximo mors est. Non certum ad hos ictus destinavi locum: quacumque vis pervium est. Ipsum illud quod vocatur mori, quo anima discedit a corpore, brevius est quam ut sentiri tanta velocitas possit: sive fauces nodus elisit, sive

spiramentum aqua praecludit, sive in caput lapsos subiacentis soli duritia comminuit, siue haustus ignis cursum animae remeantis interscidit, quidquid est, properat. Ecquid erubescitis? quod tam cito fit timetis diu!’ (*De Providentia* 6.7)

[32] Itaque de isto feremus sententiam, an oporteat fastidire senectutis extrema et finem non opperiri sed manu facere. Prope est a timente qui fatum segnis exspectat, sicut ille ultra modum deditus vino est qui amphoram exsiccat et faecem quoque exsorbet. [33] De hoc tamen quaeremus, pars summa vitae utrum faex sit an liquidissimum ac purissimum quiddam, si modo mens sine iniuria est et integri sensus animum iuvant nec defectum et praemortuum corpus est; plurimum enim refert, vitam aliquis extendat an mortem. [34] At si inutile ministeriis corpus est, quidni oporteat educere animum laborantem? et fortasse paulo ante quam debet faciendum est, ne cum fieri debebit facere non possis; et cum maius periculum sit male vivendi quam cito moriendi, stultus est qui non exigua temporis mercede magnae rei aleam redimit. Paucos longissima senectus ad mortem sine iniuria pertulit, multis iners vita sine usu sui iacuit: quanto deinde crudelius iudicas aliquid ex vita perdidisse quam ius finiendae? [35] Noli me invitus audire, tamquam ad te iam pertineat ista sententia, et quid dicam aestima: non relinquam senectutem, si me totum mihi reservabit, totum autem ab illa parte meliore; at si coeperit concutere mentem, si partes eius convellere, si mihi non vitam reliquerit sed animam, prosiliam ex aedificio putri ac ruenti. [36] Morbum morte non fugiam, dumtaxat sanabilem nec officientem animo. Non afferam mihi manus propter dolorem: sic mori vinci est. Hunc tamen si sciero perpetuo mihi esse patiendum, exhibeo, non propter ipsum, sed quia impedimento mihi futurus est ad omne propter quod vivitur; imbecillus est et ignavus qui propter dolorem moritur, stultus qui doloris causa vivit. (*Epistula* 58)

[1] Post longum intervallum Pompeios tuos vidi. In conspectum adolescentiae meae reductus sum; quidquid illic iuvenis feceram videbar mihi facere adhuc posse et paulo ante fecisse. [2] Praenavigavimus, Lucili, vitam et quemadmodum in mari, ut ait Vergilius noster,

terraeque urbesque recedunt,

sic in hoc cursu rapidissimi temporis primum pueritiam abscondimus, deinde adolescentiam, deinde quidquid est illud inter iuvenem et senem medium, in utriusque confinio positum, deinde ipsius senectutis optimos annos; novissime incipit ostendi publicus finis generis humani. [3] Scopulum esse illum putamus dementissimi: portus est,

aliquando petendus, numquam recusandus, in quem si quis intra primos annos delatus est, non magis queri debet quam qui cito navigavit. Alium enim, ut scis, venti segnes ludunt ac detinent et tranquillitatis lentissimae taedio lassant, alium pertinax flatus celerrime perfert. [4] Idem evenire nobis puta: alios vita velocissime adduxit quo veniendum erat etiam cunctantibus, alios maceravit et coxit. Quae, ut scis, non semper retinenda est; non enim vivere bonum est, sed bene vivere.

Itaque sapiens vivet quantum debet, non quantum potest. [5] Videbit ubi victurus sit, cum quibus, quomodo, quid acturus. Cogitat semper qualia vita, non quanta sit. [sit] Si multa occurrunt molesta et tranquillitatem turbantia, emittit se; nec hoc tantum in necessitate ultima facit, sed cum primum illi coepit suspecta esse fortuna, diligenter circumspicit numquid illic desinendum sit. Nihil existimat sua referre, faciat finem an accipiat, tardius fiat an citius: non tamquam de magno detrimento timet; nemo multum ex stilicidio potest perdere. [6] Citius mori aut tardius ad rem non pertinet, bene mori aut male ad rem pertinet; bene autem mori est effugere male vivendi periculum. Itaque effeminatissimam vocem illius Rhodii existimo, qui cum in caveam coniectus esset a tyranno et tamquam ferum aliquod animal aleretur, suadenti cuidam ut abstineret cibo, 'omnia' inquit 'homini, dum vivit, speranda sunt.' [7] Ut sit hoc verum, non omni pretio vita emenda est....

[8] Stultitia est timore mortis mori: venit qui occidat, exspecta. Quid occupas? quare suscipis alienae crudelitatis procurationem? utrum invides carnifici tuo an parcis? [9] Socrates potuit abstinencia finire vitam et inedia potius quam veneno mori; triginta tamen dies in carcere et in exspectatione mortis exegit, non hoc animo tamquam omnia fieri possent, tamquam multas spes tam longum tempus reciperet, sed ut praeberet se legibus, ut fruendum amicis extremum Socraten daret. Quid erat stultius quam mortem contemnere, venenum timere? [10] Scribonia, gravis femina, amita Drusi Libonis fuit, adulescentis tam stolidi quam nobilis, maiora sperantis quam illo saeculo quisquam sperare poterat aut ipse ullo. Cum aeger a senatu in lectica relatus esset non sane frequentibus exsequis—omnes enim necessarii deseruerant impie iam non reum sed funus—habere coepit consilium utrum conscisceret mortem an exspectaret. Cui Scribonia 'quid te' inquit 'delectat alienum negotium agere?' Non persuasit illi: manus sibi attulit, nec sine causa. Nam post diem tertium aut quartum inimici moriturus arbitrio si vivit, alienum negotium agit.

[11] Non possis itaque de re in universum pronuntiare, cum mortem vis externa denuntiat, occupanda sit an exspectanda; multa enim sunt quae in utramque partem trahere possunt. Si altera mors cum tormento, altera simplex et facilis est, quidni huic inicienda sit

manus? Quemadmodum navem eligam navigaturus et domum habitaturus, sic mortem exiturus e vita. [12] Praeterea quemadmodum non utique melior est longior vita, sic peior est utique mors longior. In nulla re magis quam in morte morem animo gerere debemus. Exeat qua impetum cepit: sive ferrum appetit sive laqueum sive aliquam potionem venas occupantem, pergat et vincula servitutis abrumpat. Vitam et aliis approbare quisque debet, mortem sibi: optima est quae placet. [13] Stulte haec cogitantur: 'aliquis dicet me parum fortiter fecisse, aliquis nimis temere, aliquis fuisse aliquod genus mortis animosius.' Vis tu cogitare id in manibus esse consilium ad quod fama non pertinet! Hoc unum intueri, ut te fortunae quam celerrime eripias; alioquin aderunt qui de facto tuo male existiment.

[14] Invenies etiam professores sapientiam qui vim afferendam vitae suae negent et nefas iudicent ipsum interemptorem sui fieri: exspectandum esse exitum quem natura decrevit. Hoc qui dicit non videt se libertatis viam cludere: nihil melius aeterna lex fecit quam quod unum introitum nobis ad vitam dedit, exitus multos. [15] Ego exspectem vel morbi crudelitatem vel hominis, cum possim per media exire tormenta et adversa discutere? Hoc est unum cur de vita non possimus queri: neminem tenet. Bono loco res humanae sunt, quod nemo nisi vitio suo miser est. Placet? vive: non placet? licet eo reverti unde venisti. [16] Ut dolorem capitis levares, sanguinem saepe misisti; ad extenuandum corpus vena percutitur. Non opus est vasto vulnere dividere praecordia: scalpello aperitur ad illam magnam libertatem via et puncto securitas constat. Quid ergo est quod nos facit pigros inertesque? Nemo nostrum cogitat quandoque sibi ex hoc domicilio exeundum; sic veteres inquilinos indulgentia loci et consuetudo etiam inter iniurias detinet. [17] Vis adversus hoc corpus liber esse? tamquam migraturus habita. Propone tibi quandoque hoc contubernio carendum: fortior eris ad necessitatem exeundi. Sed quemadmodum suus finis veniet in mentem omnia sine fine concupiscentibus? [18] Nullius rei meditatio tam necessaria est; alia enim fortasse exercentur in supervacuum. Adversus paupertatem praeparatus est animus: permansere divitiae. Ad contemptum nos doloris armavimus: numquam a nobis exegit huius virtutis experimentum integri ac sani felicitas corporis. Ut fortiter amissorum desideria pateremur praecepimus nobis: omnis quos amabamus superstites fortuna servavit. [19] Huius unius rei usum qui exigat dies veniet. Non est quod existimes magnis tantum viris hoc robur fuisse quo servitutis humanae claustra perrumperent; non est quod iudices hoc fieri nisi a Catone non posse, qui quam ferro non emiserat animam manu extraxit: vilissimae sortis homines ingenti impetu in tutum evaserunt, cumque e commodo mori non licuisset nec ad arbitrium suum instrumenta mortis eligere, obvia quaeque rapuerunt et quae natura non erant

noxia vi sua tela fecerunt. [20] Nuper in ludo bestiarii unus e Germanis, cum ad matutina spectacula pararetur, secessit ad exonerandum corpus—nullum aliud illi dabatur sine custode secretum; ibi lignum id quod ad emundanda obscena adhaerente spongia positum est totum in gulam farsit et interclusis faucibus spiritum elisit. Hoc fuit morti contumeliam facere. Ita prorsus, parum munde et parum decenter: quid est stultius quam fastidiose mori? [21] O virum fortem, o dignum cui fati daretur electio! Quam fortiter ille gladio usus esset, quam animose in profundam se altitudinem maris aut abscisae rupis immisisset! Undique destitutus invenit quemadmodum et mortem sibi deberet et telum, ut scias ad moriendum nihil aliud in mora esse quam velle. Existimetur de facto hominis acerrimi ut cuique visum erit, dum hoc constet, praeferendam esse spurcissimam mortem servituti mundissimae.

[22] Quoniam coepi sordidis exemplis uti, perseverabo; plus enim a se quisque exiget, si viderit hanc rem etiam a contemptissimis posse contemni. Catones Scipionesque et alios quos audire cum admiratione consuevimus supra imitationem positos putamus: iam ego istam virtutem habere tam multa exempla in ludo bestiario quam in ducibus belli civilis ostendam. [23] Cum adveheretur nuper inter custodias quidam ad matutinum spectaculum missus, tamquam somno premente nutaret, caput usque eo demisit donec radiis insereret, et tamdiu se in sedili suo tenuit donec cervicem circumactu rotae frangeret; eodem vehiculo quo ad poenam ferebatur effugit. [24] Nihil obstat erumpere et exire cupienti: in aperto nos natura custodit. Cui permittit necessitas sua, circumspiciat exitum mollem; cui ad manum plura sunt per quae sese asserat, is dilectum agat et qua potissimum liberetur consideret: cui difficilis occasio est, is proximam quamque pro optima arripiat, sit licet inaudita, sit nova. Non deerit ad mortem ingenium cui non defuerit animus. [25] Vides quemadmodum extrema quoque mancipia, ubi illis stimulos adegit dolor, excitentur et intentissimas custodias fallant? Ille vir magnus est qui mortem sibi non tantum imperavit sed invenit. Ex eodem tibi munere plura exempla promisi. [26] Secundo naumachiae spectaculo unus e barbaris lanceam quam in adversarios acceperat totam iugulo suo mersit. ‘Quare, quare’ inquit ‘non omne tormentum, omne ludibrium iamdudum effugio? quare ego mortem armatus exspecto?’ Tanto hoc speciosius spectaculum fuit quanto honestius mori discunt homines quam occidere. [27] Quid ergo? quod animi perditi quoque noxiosi habent non habebunt illi quos adversus hos casus instruxit longa meditatio et magistra rerum omnium ratio? Illa nos docet fati varios esse accessus, finem eundem, nihil autem interesse unde incipiat quod venit. [28] Eadem illa ratio monet ut si licet moriaris <quemadmodum placet, si minus> quemadmodum potes, et quidquid obvenerit ad vim afferendam tibi

invadas. Iniuriosum est rapto vivere, at contra pulcherrimum mori rapto. Vale. (*Epistula* 70)

[1] In Nomentanum meum fugi—quid putas? urbem? immo febrem et quidem subrepentem; iam manum mihi iniecerat. Medicus initia esse dicebat motis venis et incertis et naturalem turbantibus modum. Protinus itaque parari vehiculum iussi; Paulina mea retinente exire perseveravi ... quae mihi valetudinem meam commendat. Nam cum sciam spiritum illius in meo verti, incipio, ut illi consulam, mihi consulere.... [3] Indulgendum est enim honestis adfectibus; et interdum, etiam si premunt causae, spiritus in honorem suorum vel cum tormento revocandus et in ipso ore retinendus est, cum bono viro vivendum sit non quamdiu iuvat sed quamdiu oportet: ille qui non uxorem, non amicum tanti putat ut diutius in vita commoretur, qui perseverabit mori, delicatus est. Hoc quoque imperet sibi animus, ubi utilitas suorum exigit, nec tantum si vult mori, sed si coepit, intermittat et <se>-suis commodet. [4] Ingentis animi est aliena causa ad vitam reverti, quod magni viri saepe fecerunt. (*Epistula* 104)

[22] Nihil mihi videtur turpius quam optare mortem. Nam si vis vivere, quid optas mori? sive non vis, quid deos rogas quod tibi nascenti dederunt? Nam ut quandoque moriaris etiam invito positum est, ut cum voles in tua manu est; alterum tibi necesse est, alterum licet. [23] Turpissimum his diebus principium diserti mehercules viri legi: ‘ita[que]’ inquit ‘quam primum moriar.’ Homo demens, optas rem tuam. ‘Ita quam primum moriar.’ Fortasse inter has voces senex factus es; alioqui quid in mora est? Nemo te tenet: evade qua visum est; elige quamlibet rerum naturae partem, quam tibi praebere exitum iubeas. Haec nempe sunt et elementa quibus hic mundus administratur; aqua, terra, spiritus, omnia ista tam causae vivendi sunt quam viae mortis. [24] ‘Ita quam primum moriar’: ‘quam primum’ istud quid esse vis? quem illi diem ponis? citius fieri quam optas potest. Inbecillae mentis ista sunt verba et hac detestatione misericordiam captantis: non vult mori qui optat. Deos vitam et salutem roga: si mori placuit, hic mortis est fructus, optare desinere. (*Epistula* 117)

V. BECOME A PART OF THE WHOLE

[1] Puta itaque ex illa arce caelesti patrem tuum, Marcia, ... dicere:

[2] 'Cur te, filia, tam longa tenet aegritudo? Cur in tanta veri ignorance versaris, ut inique actum cum filio tuo iudices, quod integro domus statu integer ipse se ad maiores recepit suos? Nescis quantis fortuna procellis disturbet omnia? Quam nullis benignam facilemque se praestiterit, nisi qui minimum cum illa contraxerant? Regesne tibi nomen felicissimos futuros, si maturius illos mors instantibus subtraxisset malis? an Romanos duces, quorum nihil magnitudini deerit, si aliquid aetati detraxeris? an nobilissimos uiros clarissimosque ad ictum militaris gladi composita ceruice curvatos? [3] Respice patrem atque avum tuum: ille in alieni percussoris venit arbitrium; ego nihil in me cuiquam permisi et cibo prohibitus ostendi tam magno me quam uidebar animo scripsisse. Cur in domo nostra diutissime lugetur qui felicissime moritur? Coimus omnes in unum videmusque non alta nocte circumdati nil apud vos, ut putatis, optabile, nil excelsum, nil splendidum, sed humilia cuncta et graua et anxia et quotam partem luminis nostri cernentia! [4] Quid dicam nulla hic arma mutuis furere concursibus nec classes classibus frangi nec parricidia aut fingi aut cogitari nec fora litibus strepere dies perpetuos, nihil in obscuro, detectas mentes et aperta praecordia et in publico medioque uitam et omnis aevi prospectum venientiumque?

[5] 'Iuvabat unius me saeculi facta componere in parte ultima mundi et inter paucissimos gesta. Tot saecula, tot aetatum contextum, seriem, quicquid annorum est, licet uisere; licet surrectura, licet ruitura regna prospicere et magnarum urbium lapsus et maris novos cursus. [6] Nam si tibi potest solacio esse desiderii tui commune fatum, nihil quo stat loco stabit, omnia sternet abducatque secum vetustas. Nec hominibus solum (quota enim ista fortuitae potentiae portio est?), sed locis, sed regionibus, sed mundi partibus ludet. Totos supprimet montes et alibi rupes in altum novas exprimet; maria sorbebit, flumina avertet et commercio gentium rupto societatem generis humani coetumque dissolviet; alibi hiatibus vastis subducat urbes, tremoribus quatiet et ex infimo pestilentiae halitus mittet et inundationibus quicquid habitatur obducat necabitque omne animal orbe submerso et ignibus vastis torrebit incendetque mortalia. Et cum tempus advenerit, quo se mundus renovaturus extinguat, viribus ista se suis caedent et sidera sideribus incurrent et omni flagrante materia uno igni quicquid nunc ex disposito lucet ardebit. [7] Nos quoque felices animae et aeterna sortitae, cum deo visum erit iterum ista moliri, labentibus

cunctis et ipsae parua ruinae ingentis accessio in antiqua elementa vertemur.’ (*Ad Marciam* 26.1)

‘At inopinanti ereptus est.’ Sua quemque credulitas decipit et in eis, quae diligit, voluntaria mortalitatis oblivio. Natura nulli se necessitatis suae gratiam facturam esse testata est. Cotidie praeter oculos nostros transeunt notorum ignotorumque funera, nos tamen aliud agimus et subitum id putamus esse, quod nobis tota vita denuntiatur futurum. Non est itaque ista factorum iniquitas, sed mentis humanae pravitas insatiabilis rerum omnium, quae indignatur inde excidere, quo admissa est precario. [2] Quanto ille iustior, qui nuntiata fili morte dignam magno viro vocem emisit: ‘Ego cum genui, tum moriturum scivi.’ ... Non accepit tamquam novum nuntium filii mortem; quid enim est novi hominem mori, cuius tota vita nihil aliud quam ad mortem iter est? ‘Ego eum genui, tum moriturum scivi.’ [3] Deinde adiecit rem maioris et prudentiae et animi: ‘Et huic rei sustuli.’ Omnes huic rei tollimur; quisquis ad vitam editur, ad mortem destinatur. Gaudeamus ergo eo, quod dabitur, reddamusque id, cum reposcemur. Alium alio tempore fata comprehendent, neminem praeteribunt. In procinctu stet animus et id quod necesse est numquam timeat, quod incertum est semper expectet. [4] Quid dicam duces ducumque progeniem et multis aut consulatibus conspicuos aut triumphis sorte defunctos inexorabili? Tota eum regibus regna populiue eum regentibus tulere fatum suum; omnes, immo omnia in ultimum diem spectant. Non idem universis finis est; alium in medio cursu vita deserit, alium in ipso aditu relinquit, alium in extrema senectute fatigatum iam et exire cupientem vix emittit; alio quidem atque alio tempore, omnes tamen in eundem locum tendimus. Utrumne stultius sit nescio mortalitatis legem ignorare, an impudentius recusare. (*Ad Polybium* 11)

[13] Certis eunt cuncta temporibus: nasci debent, crescere, exstingui. Quaecumque supra nos vides currere et haec quibus innixi atque impositi sumus veluti solidissimis carpentur ac desinent; nulli non senectus sua est. Inaequalibus ista spatiis eodem natura dimittit: quidquid est non erit, nec peribit sed resolvetur. [14] Nobis solvi perire est; proxima enim intuemur, ad ulteriora non prospicit mens hebes et quae se corpori addixerit; alioqui fortius finem sui suorumque pateretur, si speraret, <ut> omnia illa, sic vitam mortemque per vices ire et composita dissolvi, dissoluta componi, in hoc opere aeternam artem cuncta temperantis dei verti. [15] Itaque ut M. Cato, cum aevum animo percucurrerit, dicet, ‘omne humanum genus, quodque est quodque erit, morte damnatum est; omnes quae usquam rerum potiuntur urbes quaeque alienorum imperiorum magna sunt decora, ubi fuerint aliquando quaeretur et vario exitii genere tollentur:

alias destruent bella, alias desidia paxque ad inertiam versa consumet et magnis opibus exitiosa res, luxus. Omnes hos fertiles campos repentini maris inundatio abscondet aut in subitam cavernam considentis soli lapsus abducat. Quid est ergo quare indigni aut doleam, si exiguo momento publica fata praecedo?’ [16] Magnus animus deo pareat et quidquid lex universi iubet sine cunctatione patiatur: aut in meliorem emittitur vitam lucidius tranquilliusque inter divina mansurus aut certe sine ullo futurus incommodo, si naturae remiscebatur et revertetur in totum. (*Epistula* 71)

[3] Profecto modo: intelleges quaedam ideo minus timenda quia multum metus afferunt. Nullum malum magnum quod extremum est. Mors ad te venit: timenda erat si tecum esse posset: necesse est aut non perveniat aut transeat. [4] ‘Difficile est’ inquis ‘animum perducere ad contemptionem animae.’ Non vides quam ex frivolis causis contemnatur? Alius ante amicae fores laqueo pependit, alius se praecipitavit e tecto ne dominum stomachantem diutius audiret, alius ne reduceretur e fuga ferrum adegit in viscera: non putas virtutem hoc effecturam quod efficit nimia formido? Nulli potest segura vita contingere qui de producenda nimis cogitat, qui inter magna bona multos consules numerat. [5] Hoc cotidie meditare, ut possis aequo animo vitam relinquere, quam multi sic complectuntur et tenent quomodo qui aqua torrente rapiuntur spinas et aspera. Plerique inter mortis metum et vitae tormenta miseri fluctuantur et vivere nolunt, mori nesciunt. [6] Fac itaque tibi iucundam vitam omnem pro illa sollicitudinem deponendo. Nullum bonum adiuvat habentem nisi ad cuius amissionem praeparatus est animus; nullius autem rei facilius amissio est quam quae desiderari amissa non potest. Ergo adversus haec quae incidere possunt etiam potentissimis adhortare te et indura. [7] De Pompei capite pupillus et spado tulere sententiam, de Crasso crudelis et insolens Parthus; Gaius Caesar iussit Lepidum Dextro tribuno praebere cervicem, ipse Chaerae praestitit; neminem eo fortuna provexit ut non tantum illi minaretur quantum permiserat. Noli huic tranquillitati confidere: momento mare evertitur; eodem die ubi luserunt navigia sorbentur. [8] Cogita posse et latronem et hostem admoveere iugulo tuo gladium; ut potestas maior absit, nemo non servus habet in te vitae necisque arbitrium. Ita dico: quisquis vitam suam contempsit tuae dominus est. Recognosce exempla eorum qui domesticis insidiis perierunt, aut aperta vi aut dolo: intelleges non pauciores servorum ira cecidisse quam regum. Quid ad te itaque quam potens sit quem times, cum id propter quod times nemo non possit? [9] At si forte in manus hostium incideris, victor te duci iubebit—eo nempe quo duceris. Quid te ipse decipis et hoc nunc primum quod olim patiebaris intellegis? Ita dico: ex quo natus es, duceris. (*Epistula*

Pompeios, celebrem Campaniae urbem ... consedisce terrae motu vexatis quaecumque adiacebant regionibus, Lucili, virorum optime, audivimus, et quidem hibernis diebus, quos vacare a tali periculo maiores nostri solebant promittere.... [1,4] Quaerenda sunt trepidis solacia et demendus ingens timor. Quid enim cuiquam satis tutum videri potest, si mundus ipse concutitur et partes eius solidissimae labant? Si quod unum immobile est in illo fixumque, ut cuncta in se intenta sustineat, fluctuatur; si quod proprium habet terra perdidit, stare: ubi tandem resident metus nostri? Quod corpora receptaculum invenient, quo sollicita confugiant, si ab imo metus nascitur et funditus trahitur? ... [1,6] Quid tibi esse non dico auxilii sed solacii potest, ubi timor fugam perdidit? Quid est, inquam, satis munitum, quid ad tutelam alterius ac sui firmum? Hostem muro repellam, et praeruptae altitudinis castella vel magnos exercitus difficultate aditus morabuntur; a tempestate nos uindicat portus; nimborum vim effusam et sine fine cadentes aquas tecta propellunt; fugientes non sequitur incendium; aduersus tonitruum et minas caeli subterraneae domus et defossi in altum specus remedia sunt (ignis ille caelestis non transverberat terram sed exiguo eius obiectu retunditur); in pestilentia mutare sedes licet: nullum malum sine effugio est.

[1,7] Numquam fulmina populos perusserunt; pestilens caelum exhaustit urbes, non abstulit: hoc malum latissime patet inevitabile, avidum, publice noxium. Non enim domos solum aut familias aut urbes singulas haurit, gentes totas regionesque submergit et modo ruinas operit, modo in altam voraginem condit ac ne id quidem relinquit ex quo appareat quod non est saltem fuisse, sed supra nobilissimas urbes sine ullo vestigio prioris habitus solum extenditur. [1,8] Nec desunt qui hoc genus mortis magis timeant quo in abruptum cum sedibus suis eunt et e vivorum numero vivi auferuntur, tamquam non omne fatum ad eundem terminum veniat. Hoc habet inter cetera iustitiae suae natura praecipuum quod, cum ad exitum ventum est, omnes in aequo sumus. [1,9] Nihil itaque interest utrum me lapis unus elidat, an monte toto premar; utrum supra me domus unius onus veniat et sub exiguo eius cumulo ac pulvere exspirem, an totus caput meum terrarum orbis abscondat; in luce hunc et in aperto spiritum reddam an in vasto terrarum dehiscentium sinu; solus in illud profundum an cum magno comitatu populorum concadentium ferar; nihil interest mea quantus circa mortem meam tumultus sit: ipsa ubique tantundem est.

[1,10] Proinde magnum sumamus animum adversus istam cladem, quae nec evitari nec provideri potest, desinamusque audire istos, qui Campaniae renuntiaverunt quique post hunc casum emigraverunt

negantque ipsos umquam in illam regionem accessuros: quis enim illis promittit melioribus fundamentis hoc aut illud solum stare? [1,11] Omnia eiusdem sortis sunt et, si nondum mota, tamen mobilia: hunc fortasse in quo securius consistitis locum haec nox aut hic ante noctem dies scindet. Unde scis an melior eorum locorum condicio sit in quibus iam vires suas fortuna consumpsit et quae in futurum ruina sua fulta sunt? [1,12] Erramus enim, si ullam terrarum partem exceptam immunemque ab hoc periculo credimus: omnes sub eadem iacent lege; nihil ita ut immobile esset natura concepit; alia temporibus aliis cadunt et, quemadmodum in urbibus magnis nunc haec domus nunc illa suspenditur, ita in hoc orbe terrarum ...

[2,1] Quid ago? Solacium adversus pericula rara promiseram: ecce undique timenda denuntio.... [2,2] Hoc itaque generi humano dictum puta quod illis subita captiuitate inter ignes et hostem stupentibus dictum est: 'una salus victis nullam sperare salutem.' [2,3] Si vultis nihil timere, cogitate omnia esse metuenda; circumspicite quam leuibus causis discutiamur: non cibus nobis, non umor, non uigilia, non somnus sine mensura quadam salubria sunt; iam intellegitis nugatoria esse nos et imbecilla corpuscula, fluida, non magna molitione perdenda. Sine dubio id unum periculi nobis est quod tremunt terrae, quod subito dissipantur ac superposita deducunt! [2,4] Magni se aestimat qui fulmina et motus terrarum hiatusque formidat. Vult ille imbecillitatis sibi suae conscius timere pituitam? Ita uidelicet nati sumus, tam felicia sortiti membra, in hanc magnitudinem crevimus! Et ob hoc, nisi mundi partibus motis, nisi caelum intonuerit, nisi terra subsederit, perire non possumus! [2,5] Unguiculi nos et ne totius quidem dolor sed aliqua ab latere eius scissura conficit! Et ego timeam terras trementes, quem crassior saliuia suffocat? Ego extimescam emotum sedibus suis mare, et ne aestus maiore quam solet cursu plus aquarum trahens superveniat, cum quosdam strangulaverit potio male lapsa per fauces? Quam stultum est mare horrere, cum scias stillicidio perire te posse! [2,6] Nullum maius solacium est mortis quam ipsa mortalitas, nullum autem omnium istorum quae extrinsecus terrent quam quod innumerabilia pericula in ipso sinu sunt. Quid enim dementius quam ad tonitrua succidere et sub terram correpere fulminum metu? Quid stultius quam timere nutationem terrae aut subitos montium lapsus et irruptiones maris extra litus eiecti, cum mors ubique praesto sit et undique occurrat nihilque sit tam exiguum quod non in perniciem generis humani satis valeat? [2,7] Adeo non debent nos ista confundere, tamquam plus in se mali habeant quam vulgaris mors, ut contra, cum sit necessarium e vita exire et aliquando emittere animam, maiore perire ratione iuvet. Necesse est mori ubicumque, quandoque: stet licet ista humus et se teneat suis finibus nec ulla iactetur iniuria, supra me quandoque erit.

<Quid> interest, ego illam mihi an ipsa se mihi imponat? [2,8] Diducitur et ingenti potentia nescio cuius mali rumpitur et me in immensam altitudinem abducit; quid porro? Mors levior in plano est? Quid habeo quod querar, si rerum natura me non vult iacere ignobili leto, si mihi inicit sui partem?

[2,9] Egregie Vagellius meus in illo inclito carmine: 'Si cadendum est,' inquit, 'e caelo cecidisse velim.' Idem licet dicere: si cadendum est, cadam orbe concusso, non quia fas est optare publicam cladem, sed quia ingens mortis solacium est terram quoque videre mortalem. (*Quaestiones Naturales* 6)

EPILOGUE: PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

Intromisitque ad Senecam unum ex centurionibus qui necessitatem ultimam denuntiaret. Ille interritus poscit testamenti tabulas; ac denegante centurione conversus ad amicos, quando meritis eorum referre gratiam prohiberetur, quod unum iam et tamen pulcherrimum habeat, imaginem vitae suae relinquere testatur, cuius si memores essent, bonarum artium famam fructum constantis amicitiae laturos ... complectitur uxorem et paululum adversus praesentem fortitudinem mollitus rogat oratque temperaret dolori neu aeternum susciperet, sed in contemplatione vitae per virtutem actae desiderium mariti solaciis honestis toleraret. illa contra sibi quoque destinata mortem adseverat manumque percussoris exposcit. tum Seneca gloriae eius non adversus, simul amore, ne sibi unice dilectam ad iniurias relinqueret, 'vitae' inquit 'delenimenta monstraveram tibi, tu mortis decus mavis: non invidebo exemplo. sit huius tam fortis exitus constantia penes utrosque par, claritudinis plus in tuo fine.' post quae eodem ictu brachia ferro exolvunt. Seneca, quoniam senile corpus et parco victu tenuatum lenta effugia sanguini praebebat, crurum quoque et poplitum venas abrumpit; saevisque cruciatibus defessus, ne dolore suo animum uxoris infringeret atque ipse visendo eius tormenta ad impatientiam delaberetur, suadet in aliud cubiculum abscedere. et novissimo quoque momento suppeditante eloquentia advocatis scriptoribus pleraque tradidit ... Seneca interim, durante tractu et lentitudine mortis, Statium Annaeum, diu sibi amicitiae fide et arte medicinae probatum, orat provisum pridem venenum quo damnati publico Atheniensium iudicio extinguerentur promeret; adlatumque hausit frustra, frigidus iam artus et cluso corpore adversum vim veneni. postremo stagnum calidae aquae introiit, respiciens proximos servorum addita voce libare se liquorem illum Iovi liberatori. exim balneo inlatus et vapore eius exanimatus sine ullo funeris sollemni crematur. ita codicillis praescripserat, cum etiam tum praedives et praepotens supremis suis consuleret. (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.61–64)

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. *Scientific American*, December 1, 2016.
2. “The Trip Treatment,” *New Yorker*, February 9, 2015.

I. PREPARE YOURSELF

1. The sentiment is not found in the surviving writings of Epicurus and is not easily reconciled with his philosophy.
2. Seemingly a reference to the Platonic doctrine of reincarnation of souls, a doctrine not elsewhere endorsed by Seneca. The sentence which follows also refers to a Platonic notion, shared by Vergil’s *Aeneid*, that souls have their memories partly or wholly erased before entering a new mortal life.
3. The Latin word, which translates as “sigh” or “deep breath,” is treated here as a proper name Seneca has assigned to his respiratory ailment.
4. That is, I live one hour at a time.

II. HAVE NO FEAR

1. Canus was a Stoic philosopher, like Seneca. Seneca was a young senator at the time of the episode retold here. In what follows, the name “Caligula,” in fact a nickname, has been substituted for the proper name Seneca uses whenever referring to this emperor, “Gaius.”
2. A notoriously cruel Greek tyrant, said to have roasted his enemies alive inside a bronze statue of a bull.
3. Seneca here contrasts the deaths of two of the senatorial leaders in the Roman civil wars of the mid-first century BC. Cato the Younger, sometimes called Cato of Utica, took a sword to his own vital organs after losing a crucial battle to Julius Caesar in North Africa. Decimus Junius Brutus (whom Seneca calls Brutus, but is here called Decimus to avoid confusion with the assassin of Caesar) led an army against Mark Antony, the heir to Caesar’s power, and was captured and executed after his troops deserted him.
4. The terms “indifferent” and (just above) “intermediate” belong to Stoic vocabulary, here translated by Seneca from Greek into Latin. They denote a class of things that do not in themselves tend either

toward virtue or toward vice, happiness or unhappiness. Seneca here distinguishes the kind of “indifferent” represented by prolongation of life—preferable to death, even if it does not conduce to happiness—from something that truly doesn’t matter at all.

5. In these three lines, Seneca splices together two passages of the *Aeneid*, united by their shared use of the word *ianitor*, “door-guard.” The first (8.296–97) refers to the monster Cacus, who dwells in a gruesome cavern; the second (6.400–401), more relevant to Seneca’s point here, comes from the description of Aeneas’s descent to the underworld.
6. Demetrius was a Greek Cynic philosopher of the mid-first century AD, whom Seneca admired greatly for his ascetic habits and uncompromising morals.
7. Referring to the *sapiens*, the idealized sage or perfect master who would always act in accord with Stoic beliefs.
8. The word “burns” (*exurat*) is an editorial insertion, where the text of the manuscripts seems to be corrupt.

III. HAVE NO REGRETS

1. An editorial insertion, done to repair a mangled stretch of text.
2. Stoic cosmology held that life on earth was periodically destroyed by cyclically recurring natural disasters, then generated anew.
3. Seneca refers to this fellow Stoic as though his addressee, Lucilius, would certainly know who was meant, though the man’s identity is today obscure, and he may be only Seneca’s own invented mouthpiece.
4. Oddly, Seneca leaves implicit the decision taken by Marcellinus to end his own life. The subject of this sentence and the next three is the nameless Stoic counselor.
5. The “us” of this sentence is Seneca himself. He refers here to an ailment that caused him periodic spells of fainting or suffocation, described in more detail in *Epistle* 54, quoted in part I.
6. A quote from Vergil’s *Aeneid* (6.376), where the Sibyl tells the ghost of Palinurus, whose body remains unburied, that it cannot cross the river Styx.
7. As often in the *Epistles*, Seneca’s “you” has shifted from Lucilius, his putative addressee, to an imaginary person who represents humankind generally or, in this case, the wealthy elite of Roman society.
8. Mushrooms, along with the oysters and mullets mentioned earlier, were among the choice delicacies of the Roman palate; some were also known to be poisonous, so Seneca’s exemplum has double point.

9. The term translated “closer,” *clausula*, usually refers to a rhythmic cadence used as a flourish at the end of a paragraph or speech.
10. That is, if he had lived a longer time.
11. As often in his writings, Seneca here uses the first person plural to refer to himself. In what follows he refers to the astronomical inquiries he engaged in early in life, and perhaps also to the *Quaestiones Naturales*, a work of natural science that occupied the same period as the *Epistles*.
12. That is, death, conceived here as a departure into the astral realm.
13. Gladiatorial games and athletic contests were often staged over several consecutive days.
14. Romans of a certain station would use morning hours to visit patrons or powerful friends from whom they needed advice or favors.
15. The line is quoted from Vergil’s *Eclogues* (1.73), where Meliboeus, a cowherd, is speaking bitterly to himself; he’s lost his land and been driven into exile, so he can no longer do the things he mentions.
16. Maecenas was a top adviser and minister of culture under Augustus, half a century before Seneca’s time. He wrote both prose and verse, but his works have not survived; the lines quoted below may belong to a satirical version of the Prometheus legend.
17. In the first passage of part IV, Seneca reveals that some torturers in his time impaled their victims through the genitals.
18. *Aeneid* 12.646, a half line spoken by the doomed warrior, Turnus. According to Suetonius (*Nero* 7.2), the same quote was used as a taunt when Nero was seeking an escape from his collapsing principate.
19. Perhaps a guarded reference to the fact that vicious emperors, such as Caligula and Nero, might compel those who stood up to their abuses of power to commit suicide, a theme Seneca deals with more explicitly in the passages found in part IV.

IV. SET YOURSELF FREE

1. Seneca seems to refer here to debt slavery, a practice which had in fact been abolished by Roman law well before his time.
2. Only this last device constitutes a true cross, but the Latin word *cruces*, here translated “crosses,” in fact covered a wide array of vertical torture devices.
3. An instrument of torture that used a set of ropes, resembling the strings of a lyre, to stretch and dislocate a victim’s limbs.
4. The text here is corrupt and the meaning must be guessed at.
5. Petreius and Juba were two of Cato’s allies in the fight against

Caesar. After their defeat in battle, they died by mutual pact, variously described in different sources. According to one source, the two leaders fought a duel in which Juba was killed, whereupon Petreius took his own life. Seneca has each of them kill the other, perhaps to pose a greater contrast with Cato's imminent self-slaughter.

6. That is, he was revived by the surgeon who stitched up his wound.
7. The Latin text is uncertain here and "if" has been added.
8. With this last item in his list, Seneca may be thinking of the suicide of Porcia, sister of Cato and wife of Brutus, who is said (unreliably) to have died of suffocation after putting live embers in her mouth.
9. *Aeneid* 3.72, where Aeneas describes his ship's departure from Thrace.
10. The death Libo anticipates was from execution, not disease; as Tacitus makes clear (*Annals* 2.27–31), he was on trial at the time of his illness on grave charges, and was in fact (as Seneca goes on to say) posthumously convicted.
11. The translation here is an attempt to capture Seneca's play on words in *puncto*, which can mean either "in a moment" or "with a small cut."
12. For the grisly story of Cato's suicide, see the introduction to *De Providentia* 2.9, the third passage in this section.
13. Seneca elsewhere describes the morning portion of the gladiatorial games as particularly brutal, usually involving fights to the death.
14. The words in brackets are an editorial insertion.

V. BECOME A PART OF THE WHOLE

1. Marcia's father, Aulus Cremutius Cordus, was long dead. Though agnostic about the afterlife, Seneca sometimes anticipates Christian belief by imagining that the souls of the dead dwell in bliss in a celestial realm.
2. Cordus had starved himself to death to avoid a conviction for disloyalty, after a historical narrative he published incurred the wrath of the emperor Tiberius. Nothing is known of the fate of Marcia's grandfather, apart from what Seneca tells us here.
3. The work of history for which Cordus was prosecuted dealt with the Roman civil wars of the 40s and 30s BC.
4. Stoic cosmology predicted that *ekpyroseis*, fiery exhalations from the edge of the cosmos, would destroy the earth every few thousand years, but Seneca sometimes reimagined that apocalypse as a universal flood.

5. The Latin *sustuli* also means “raised,” but in a different sense: Roman fathers ritually held aloft their newborn sons in a formal declaration of paternity.
6. In the three episodes to which Seneca refers, Pompey the Great was beheaded in Egypt at the order of a teenaged King Ptolemy and his eunuch vizier; Marcus Licinius Crassus was killed during a botched negotiation with Parthian officers, after his defeat at the battle of Carrhae; and the emperor Caligula (here called by his nickname rather than the given name, Gaius, by which Seneca referred to him) was assassinated by a Praetorian named Chaerea, after first ordering the deaths of his brother-in-law Lepidus and many other perceived enemies.
7. This earthquake struck Campania in AD 63 or 64, a precursor of the much more destructive volcanic eruption that buried Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79.
8. The quote is from Vergil’s *Aeneid* (2.354), where the “flames and enemies” belong to the fall of Troy.
9. That is, the phlegm that might cause death by obstructing one’s windpipe.

EPILOGUE: PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

1. Hemlock, the paralyzing toxin that Socrates drank to end his life.
2. The gesture recalls the death of Socrates as described in Plato’s *Phaedo*: Socrates is there shown requesting a sacrificial offering in gratitude to Asclepius, god of healing. Jupiter, the supreme god of the traditional Roman pantheon, had the epithet “Liberator” in recognition of his power to save cities from enslavement by their enemies, but Seneca here deploys the name in a different sense, depicting his own imminent death as the liberation of his soul from his body.